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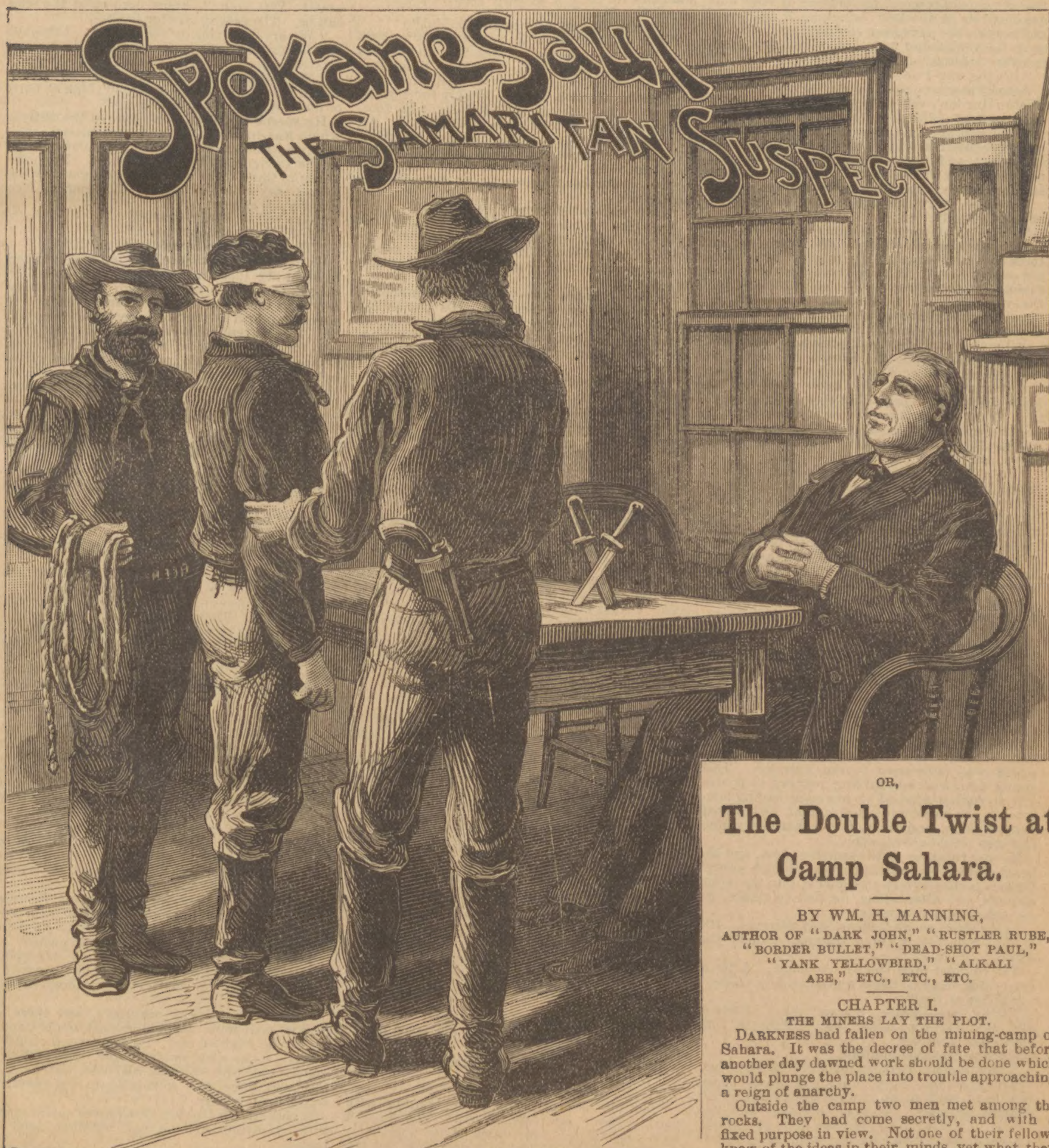
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OR,

The Double Twist at Camp Sahara.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "DARK JOHN," "RUSTLER RUBE,"
"BORDER BULLET," "DEAD-SHOT PAUL,"
"YANK YELLOWBIRD," "ALKALI
ABE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MINERS LAY THE PLOT.

DARKNESS had fallen on the mining-camp of Sahara. It was the decree of fate that before another day dawned work should be done which would plunge the place into trouble approaching a reign of anarchy.

Outside the camp two men met among the rocks. They had come secretly, and with a fixed purpose in view. Not one of their fellows knew of the ideas in their minds, yet what they had to do concerned all.

The first to arrive at the rendezvous was one

"CHOOSE, PRISONER!" THE SAMARITAN COMMANDED. "IF YOU CHANCE TO PICK UP THE PLAIN KNIFE, YOU LIVE; IF THE MARKED ONE, YOU DIE!"

who waited with impatience, and hailed the coming of his partner with the brusque exclamation:

"So you're here?"

"I ain't nowhere else," agreed the other, practically.

"You are none too soon. On this night, Peter, the whole course of life at Sahara will be changed; we shall see if we are to be trodden under the heel of any man."

"Likewise," added Peter, "we shall see if we're ter get our necks inter a hemp cravat!"

"Are you afraid?"

"Gurdon, I take it I am not a timid man, though I don't know exactly. We will assume I ain't afeerd, an' go on with the circus. Let her went!"

Peter had already made an impression as an eccentric man. His way was not the way of ordinary men, and now, when he who had been called Gurdon was so much in earnest, and so full of fiery zeal withal, Peter was as calm as if the subject had been of trivial nature. Despite the last question from Gurdon, he really had no doubts of Peter's courage, and he proceeded to come to the point.

"Do we rob the train, to-night?" he demanded, in an intense voice.

"We do, ef we don't get set down on afore we work the raffle," replied Peter, cheerfully.

"The time has come for us to assert our rights. This camp has long groaned under the weight of the oppressors' lash. We are slaves, and no better; we go and come at the bidding of men who are destitute of the first principles of manhood and honor. We have been robbed, here, as much as if the very bread had been taken from our mouths by force. Is not this true?"

"It's the way I understand it."

Again Peter's composure was in marked contrast to Gurdon's vehemence. The latter was not unlike a fiery political orator in seeming, though the comparison would be unjust to him. He was moved by motives which every honest man ought to respect, and it was the weight of long-continued wrongs which kindled the fire within him and made it so perceptible in his manner.

Unmoved by Peter's phlegmatic air, he went on dramatically:

"Fifty men labor in the mines of Sahara, and many women and children are dependent on them for daily bread. It's mighty little they get—and why? Simply because there are thieves and scoundrels here—men who are taking the very life-blood from us all. I need not refer to this, for you know the story well. We are a starving community. Why? Thomas Hammond and Daniel Wayland, president and secretary, respectively, of the Sahara mines, tell us that the mines do not pay, and we are kept at the starvation point. We know they lie; we know the mines do pay—that they must be paying. Now, we purpose proving it; proving it, if need be, at the expense of blood!"

"Somebody else's blood," put in eccentric Peter, gravely.

"To-night the miners hold their ball, and will dance while their stomachs are empty; dance according to that plan we all thought so noble when it was first inaugurated, but now believe to be a snare. We believe that when all the deluded victims are thus engaged some of the tools of Hammond and Wayland will take away our hard-earned gold and rob us—rob us as we have been robbed many times before. I mean, they will try to do it, but you and I are going to be in the way of the plot with a counter-plot."

"An' revolvers?"

"And with revolvers?"

"Ef Hinch Trim an' Meek Moses are the men I take 'em ter be, in a fightin' sense, there'll be a pile o' fun before we rob that train!"

"What of it?" demanded Gurdon, fiercely.

"We will win or die! That is our watchword."

"Fact, b'durn!"

Gurdon Forrest folded his arms and looked back to the camp with an air of somberness which was impressive in the extreme. This young man who was talking robbery so boldly was no ruffian, no road-agent and no willing law-breaker; he was simply doing what he believed to be his duty, and doing it at a sacrifice which few men would have made.

He was thinking of the sacrifice, now, and his heart was heavy, but his purpose did not waver. Chance turned Peter's meditation into the same channel, and after a long, inquisitive glance, he remarked in a low tone:

"One thing we ain't mentioned, Gurdon. It's about—well, about Olive Hammond, don't yer know?"

The younger man started violently. After a noticeable delay he made reply in a low voice:

"What of her?"

"Why, you—you— She an' you— Durn it all! you like her, don't ye? An' she is Tom Hammond's niece!"

Gurdon breathed audibly.

"This matter weakens my will," he admitted. "You know me, Peter; I am not a feeble man; but it is hard to go against one's self and his dearest interests. As you have said, I—I like Olive. I put it mildly, but the facts are strong. I have known Olive long and well, though there is no fixed understanding between us. There always has been an obstacle in the way of such

an understanding. I have had my opinion of Thomas Hammond—her uncle! It has been a rock in my path."

"Where'll you be ef you rob the uncle's train?" asked Peter, in his blunt way.

"Don't speak of it! And yet, the danger must be faced. If we rob the train I put an obstacle of monumental size between us. Even if I am not detected, the sting will remain; while if I am detected, Thomas Hammond will be my deadly enemy!"

"An' what o' her?"

"True, what of her?"

"Looks squally, don't it?"

"It has taken a gigantic effort to get my courage up to this point," confessed Gurdon, his voice barely audible, so deeply was he moved; "and now it is done, I am half a coward, still. But I will not hesitate—I will not; I will not!"

He reiterated the assertion as if he had need to, in order to keep up his courage. Peter shook his head gravely.

"I'm sorry fer ye, b'durn!"

The honest miner sighed, but thought it prudent to say no more. Gurdon stood inactive for some time, and then suddenly aroused.

"I have no right to think of myself or my selfish interests. Let it pass. Well, it is all arranged with us?"

"Reckon so; I'm all ready."

"Then we will meet at the place agreed upon. Come well armed. Let your belt bristle with weapons, for it will be their lives or ours, if it comes to a fight."

"Yes; an' it may be a general killin'."

Peter did not seem to be especially in love with his work, but the die was cast, and he was not the man to go back on his word. Some further conversation took place, and then they separated. Gurdon walked briskly for awhile, but when he was out of Peter's sight his footsteps slackened and he came to a full stop. All at once he seemed to forget everything about him, and he became a statue, full of warring emotions. He brushed his hand nervously across his forehead, presently, as if to dispel a nightmare.

"Only ruin is before me!" he groaned.

Footsteps sounded near him. He looked up, as if angry that any one should presume to intrude on his solitude. He was, however, unable to escape notice, and he stood his ground as well as possible.

He glanced in the direction of the unknown, but suddenly grew nervous. His companion wanderer of the evening was a woman. The fact was a surprise, but more was in store for him. He started and changed color like a guilty school-boy.

"Olive!" he muttered, blankly.

The trim form he had seen came up briskly. Even in the shadows of the hour a total stranger would have been impressed strongly by what was to be seen. That form was singularly perfect, and it revealed a willowy grace equally impressive. Gurdon stood still and the lady was soon by his side.

"Have you been having a foot-race?" she demanded, somewhat irritably.

"I don't understand," he returned, weakly.

"I saw you with Poyallup Peter, but just as I came near you, he and you both moved on. I then sought to overtake you, but you raced away as if for a wager. I quickly gave it up, and only that you stopped, we should not have met. I trust I don't intrude?"

There was a trace of resentment in her voice which quickly made itself felt.

"Intrude?" he cried, thinking of nothing else, just then; "indeed, you do not. You should know that."

"Ought I, really?"

"Indeed, you should."

"Really, you encourage me. I was afraid you had seen me, and was running away from me on purpose."

Olive smiled and kept up her bantering manner. She was a girl of refinement and dainty ways, and the last of the persons to show undue boldness. She and Gurdon Forrest were old friends, so she could speak in the vein she had assumed and not infringe upon any law of society or decorum. As for him, he had forgotten more serious things for the time, and thought only of clearing his reputation.

"I'm always glad to see you," he declared.

"You ought to know that."

"Oh! I was only jesting."

She had, really, been piqued at the beginning, but the feeling was gone, now. Quickly dropping the subject, she lightly added:

"Are you all ready for the Mutual Ball?"

Gurdon was dumb. He could not find the power of speech.

"Or, perhaps, you are not going?"

It was a fresh pleasantry on her part, but it went home to the young miner.

"Perhaps I shall not," he agreed moodily.

"What?"

"I may not go," he explained.

"Gurdon Forrest, what's the matter with you? I never saw such a man! You haven't been yourself for some days. I did hope your mysterious inclinations had worn away, but the malady appears to have grown upon you. Per-

haps you will not go to the ball! And may a humble person condescend to ask why?"

"It is—it is frivolous, and—well, it's frivolous."

Looking only at the ground, he muttered the explanation in a way so insincere and evasive that she relapsed into silence and amazement.

CHAPTER II.

FOR LOVE OF OLIVE, OR HATE OF THOMAS?

GURDON studied the ground until the pause grew painful. Then he looked up suddenly. Olive was gazing at him in a way he did not find pleasant. He made a strong effort to shake off the incubus upon his spirits.

"Hard work in the mines does not tend to make one nimble as a dancer," he argued.

"And you are aged twenty-three! Pray, how long do you expect to be able to get out among your neighbors? Venerable men prefer an arm-chair and their own rooms, you know."

"I may cease to be seen among my fellow-men at an early date."

"Gurdon Forrest, what is the matter with you?" cried Olive, thoroughly vexed, at last.

"Nothing."

"Nothing! Do you expect me to believe that? I am not so shallow as you think. I can see there is something serious."

"I assure you there is not."

"Oh! of course I do not wish to intrude upon you if my presence is unwelcome, or my views so very annoying—"

"Miss Hammond," the miner cried, "don't be cruel! You ought to know nothing of the kind can be. The past speaks for itself—"

"We are referring to the present. I think I had better return to my home," and she made a motion to go.

"Stop! stop! Do not go, I implore you! What have I done that you should think so hard of me? Why will you wrong me?"

His speech conveyed a measure of the distress which was in his mind, and she paused. She had not wished to go, but had been driven to it, as she thought, by his own manner. Now, she began to think there was serious reason why she should stay where she was. Looking at him gravely she asked:

"Are you ill, Mr. Forrest?"

"Ill? No; I am quite well."

"Then I don't understand you at all."

Gurdon stood in silence. What evil fate had brought her there at that time? He had been obliged to struggle hard enough to get his resolution to the point of action, and even now it was not so firm as that of a conspirator should be. He had resolved to make a martyr of himself for others, and in so doing he had been aware that he would probably lose all claim upon Olive's esteem. This was something which shook his will to the core, but he had borne up by keeping out of her sight.

Now, unkind fate had brought them together.

As he looked at her he wavered. Why should he sacrifice all his own interest? Why should he sacrifice her? He was tempted to throw over his plan; to remain Olive's friend, though others suffered, instead of him. Which should he do?

Should he decide for love of Olive, or for hate of Thomas?

These two, uncle and niece, represented the extremes of the case.

As his gaze wandered from her it rested upon the shanties of Sahara; a place so named because its people were at the lowest ebb of poverty and distress. Then the old mood came back. For their sake he would hold to his plan, let the result be what it might to him. The verdict once decided upon, he grew stronger. He grew ashamed of his irresolution, too, and decided to act the man, whether he went to honor or disgrace.

His voice was firm as he returned:

"I am rather surprised that I am so transparent, but since it is so, I may as well have done with vain subterfuges. I confess there is something of moment on my mind. I have much to give me deep thought; much to take my time and attention. This I have never told to you—nor to any one else."

"And are you going to remain as silent, now?"

"Some things are better hid than told, Miss Hammond. It would do you no good to know what perplexes me, and I am not sure the secret is mine to confess."

"You excite my curiosity. A secret! Secrets are dear to the feminine mind, the critics of my sex say; so you can see you have excited a dangerous element. And will you not explain?"

"I cannot. Excuse me for being secretive; the truth may come out soon enough—too soon! Let it go at that for now; let well enough alone, is my advice."

"You do not speak naturally, and there is that in your mind which I cannot understand. You—you frighten me! Tell me I am foolish!"

Olive spoke with sudden force. She did not understand why she was alarmed, but, as she had said, there was something in his manner which troubled her.

It occurred to Gurdon that he was called upon to be sagacious, and he took warning, accordingly.

"I can assure you on that point; there is not

a thing which need give you serious thought. A passing cloud; no more. Don't give it a thought. I don't. These little things will come up in life."

He might have deceived many, perhaps, but he did not deceive Olive. To her it was very apparent that he had serious trouble on his mind, and equally clear that he would not divulge the nature of it. She knew him well, and could read him accordingly. For some time past he had not been as in the days of old, but this occasion revealed his mood more clearly than ever before.

Something was brewing, and she was shut out of his confidence.

She could not press the matter. They were good friends; so good that it would have been idle to suppose either had failed to think what the future would be to them if they were to link their fortunes for life, but the words necessary to cement such a bargain had never been spoken.

Thus, she could press the question no further.

She did not try to. She preferred to let him rest in peace, and this she did so far as she was able. But the peace he obtained was not a reality; memory was active, and he did not forget what work the night had in store for him.

They walked slowly toward the camp, and indulged in conversation freely. There were no periods of silence. The talk seemed, at first view, to be a success. Really, it was a total failure, and both knew it.

Gurdon walked with her to the door of her home. It was time for any one who was going to the ball to get ready, for though the evenings came early at that season of the year, delay would encroach on the space necessary for active preparation.

As Gurdon did not seem inclined to refer to matters of importance again, Olive asked one more question at the door:

"Shall you really not be at the ball?"

"I don't think I shall. My feelings don't run that way."

The miner hesitated whether to say more. He felt that there might never be another chance to make it clear to her that he was guided by high motives in taking his dangerous and violent step, and he wished to put himself right with her as far as possible; but when he considered the matter he saw how impossible it was to do even that. She was suspicious already; a renewal of the subject would only make a bad matter worse.

Olive did not press the point. She had his decision; she let it go at that. They parted in a matter-of-fact way, outwardly, and he went his way. Olive watched until the night shadows hid him from view.

"I don't understand it!" she murmured, anxiously. "There is something very wrong. What is it? I don't know, and—I dare not guess! It is not like him; he is always one who knows what he is doing, and he has reasons for his course. Now—now—I am frightened!"

She turned and went into the house.

Gurdon was in a mood even more disturbed.

"It is, perhaps, the last time she will speak to me as a friend, and even if I am not detected in my work, I shall never dare look her in the face again. She is Thomas Hammond's niece, and though I feel no remorse in striking at him, I am not hypocrite enough to go to her boldly after having made war on her uncle. Farewell, Olive; a long farewell! When another night falls you will shudder at sound of my name!"

With one backward glance he resumed his way, going home to await the time when he was to meet Puyallup Peter and—begin life as a road-agent!

He avoided other persons as he went, but was not to get to his humble shanty without an encounter. Midway he came upon a man who hailed him.

"Whither so fast, Forrest?"

"Where it may be."

"An original reply, I do declare; but it don't answer the inquiry. Never mind. This is a glorious night; the night of the Mutual Ball. Of course you will be on hand to celebrate with your fellows?"

"I celebrate when I feel like it!" rudely returned the miner.

"Why, of course, my dear fellow. Who said otherwise? Now, I shall be there, too; not to dance, for such things don't agree with me, physically, but to see the happy youth of the camp. A great occasion, Forrest; a most notable and joyous occasion!"

Gurdon set his teeth tightly to avoid pouring forth the fire that burned within him.

"We are all so lucky, here," went on the speaker, softly. "True, there is much poverty at Sahara, for which I am very sorry, but other blessings we have in great number."

"Perhaps you will name them?" cried Gurdon, hotly.

"Eh?"

"If you know of one blessing, I would be glad to hear of it. I am free to say that a more miserable set of people do not live on the face of the earth. We have nothing but your alleged work as a Samaritan, and I am not sure but that is a humbug. How is it?"

Gurdon had lost his control. The verdict given by his companion was not true. Either

that person was over-hopeful, or he was an arrant liar, and it was because the miner believed the former state of affairs to be the case that he was so dangerously frank.

The listener gazed at him in silence for some time.

"You amaze me, Forrest!" he finally made reply.

"Why?"

"Are you really oblivious to the many blessings we enjoy?"

"Doctor Littlefinger, name one if you can. Life we do possess, but it is by the mercy of a just God who remembers his creatures even in their lowest degradation. What have we more? Sir, they call you the Samaritan of Sahara. Do you deserve the title?"

The Samaritan folded his hands across a well-developed stomach.

"I will let my town'speople answer," he gently replied.

"To me it looks as if all things at this wretched place were of the nature of shams, yourself included!" declared Gurdon, hotly, as he warmed to his subject. "There are those who do nothing but sing the praises of Spokane Saul, but I am not one of them."

"I know it," softly remarked the Samaritan.

"It don't seem to trouble you."

"My friend, there never was any one engaged in a grand work but he had calumniators and foes; for of such the world is prone to be jealous."

"Jealous?" echoed Gurdon, fiercely. "That I am not, but I frankly confess, Doctor Littlefinger, that I suspect your goodness is a sham!"

CHAPTER III.

A RED INTERRUPTION.

THE Samaritan showed no vexation.

"I regret that I have in any way incurred your censure, Mr. Forrest, for I desire the good will of all. Let me hope this is but a passing cloud which will soon blow over. If I have in any way hurt your feelings, I beg you will forgive me."

His calm unconcern reminded Gurdon that he had to deal with a man of brains, and he grew wary once more.

"You ought to know yourself better than any one else does," he diplomatically replied. "I am not well posted."

"I desire the good will of all. I do not claim to be a perfect man; my friends at Sahara have an exaggerated notion of my works in their behalf. Really, I do nothing for them but to give them free medical service—which my pecuniary means enable me to do and never feel the loss of a regular fee. It is all right, Mr. Forrest. A pleasant night, is it not?"

The Samaritan looked up at the sky as if he was without any more important matters on his mind. Gurdon regretted having spoken so freely, and was quite willing to let the quarrel rest. He said no more in hostile spirit, but seized the first chance to get away.

"Confound my rash tongue!" he muttered.

"I had to go and speak my mind to Spokane Saul, when I had nothing to gain and much to lose thereby. I am too hot-blooded by far!"

The admission recalled the fact that he had work yet to do, that night, so rash that he had not dared to take any one else into the secret except happy-go-lucky Puyallup Peter.

"What does it matter?" he added; "I dare say I shall, in the morning, be where wisdom and folly will alike be of no use to me."

And why was he going to risk his happiness and life in a desperate cause?

When first this mining-camp was settled it was called New Sweden. Its projectors were Thomas Hammond and Daniel Wayland. Knowing that many Swedes were coming to the United States to begin life as farmers, the men above named formed another plan.

As a result, they appeared in Sweden to look for natives who wished to turn the soil for gold, instead of for agricultural purposes. In this they were so successful that the colony was soon formed, and in due time, located in the Rocky Mountains.

Riches had been promised the emigrants, but the golden harvest had never done more than to support them. This it did in a very precarious fashion. From the first, Poverty had reigned at New Sweden, and they never had advanced beyond the point of being barely able to get enough to eat.

Naturally, they were discontented. Every man of them would have abandoned the vain quest but for one fact. When they were organized, very poor men were barred out. No one could join unless he had money to put into the concern.

In brief, it was a joint stock concern; an alleged "mutual benefit" enterprise which had, at the start, taken all their money, and when once in New Sweden, had put them so deeply in debt to the company that, in point of fact, they had no more hope of getting out of the dilemma than they had of succeeding to the presidency of the United States.

The reason of this was not clear. It seemed that the mines ought to pay, but they did not—at least, so the managers said.

It so happened that of all the party there were

but four men who were practical miners. They were Thomas Hammond, Daniel Wayland, Hinch Trim and Moses Smith, the respective president, secretary, superintendent and assistant superintendent of the concern.

These four managed shrewdly—for Hammond said so—but the financial returns were simply wretched. The miners grew so poor in pocket that the camp's original name was lost to sight; out-iders called it "Sahara" until its citizens, seeing its appropriateness, and realizing it was, indeed, a desert, in a pecuniary sense, succumbed and used the name themselves.

Further account of the camp may be postponed until later in these pages, but it should here be explained that Gurdon Forrest had long suspected they were being victimized by Hammond and his pet men, Wayland, Trim and Smith.

The young miner had gained a theory that the periodical balls inaugurated by the leaders had a deeper meaning than they seemed, and the wild work he now had in mind was simply to test his idea.

It was supposed that only Swedes were allowed in the camp, yet Gurdon was American born. He and one other man, a certain Benoni Lyon, had been taken into the party at the start, much against the wishes of the leaders. This was because the two, though Americans, had been the children of Swedish mothers, and had relatives among the new-comers.

These relatives had insisted so strongly upon their being allowed to join that the matter was thus permitted, though Hammond, in an ungracious way, had remarked that it would not be permitted if the "boys" were not so young. This was three years before the date of this story.

The "boys" had grown older, as certain persons might yet realize.

There was a general bustle in Sahara this night, and the result was apparent a little later on. People began to gather at the house of the president, Mr. Hammond, and all had come to dance or witness the dancing. Some regarded themselves as being too old for such an amusement, but few remained away.

These dances were periodical affairs, and were due to Hammond's efforts. He had started the custom early in the history of the camp. He said it kept men and women young to meet thus. He had always requested, almost insisted, upon having all present, and his wishes had been heeded.

On this occasion they gathered as usual, youth and old age, and all was expected to go as merry as the marriage bell of tradition.

It was in this way that the affair did begin.

Dancing commenced; the scene was enlivening.

Hammond was there in all his glory, like Solomon.

The great man of Sahara was a person who did not seem to have felt the poverty of the town severely. He was a heavyweight, and sleekness was personified with him.

Over his large frame his costly black garments sat with elegance and an aristocratic nonchalance, and over his face hovered a smile which was bland and benevolent. Many there believed fully in Mr. Hammond, and they were very proud of that smile. They regarded it as something belonging in a measure to themselves and to Sahara.

Again, the great man had a kind word for all, and this was as grateful as dew to thirsty vegetation. Yet, the noblest have their enemies, and there were actually some who looked with suspicion on Mr. Hammond and his smile.

They would rather have seen the Sahara mines pay them a dividend.

Thus do the common herd reach for the sordid things of life.

Olive Hammond was late in reaching the room of dancing. When she entered, she looked around anxiously, only one inquiry in her mind. Was Gurdon Forrest present? She did not see him, and the fear which had been in her mind began to take new shape and distinctness.

What was keeping him?

After the events of the evening, she could not bring herself to look upon the matter as trivial, and she wished herself well away. But she could not absent herself; she must go through the scenes of the night, hoping that all would be well.

Next to Hammond, the most notable person present was the Samaritan of Sahara; a man still young in years, but of great weight in the camp. He stood by Hammond and talked while others danced.

When he came to the place, he had hung out a shingle which announced that Saul Littlefinger was a physician and that he would treat any poor person free of charge. This he had done, and he had become the idol of the camp.

Few ever gave him his professional title. He had come from Spokane, he said, and after the fashion of the West, he had a proper sobriquet. It was said he had been the first to suggest the name of "Spokane Saul," and circumstances favored the truth of the statement.

Olive tried to avoid dancing, at once, by taking a retired place, but to her came a man with the request for her company.

"I would rather watch them for awhile," she answered. "Won't you sit down with me, Mr. Lyon?"

He said he would, and did.

"They're as happy as usual," she remarked.

"Yes, unless it's some o' the hungry ones," he returned, bluntly.

"Do you really suppose any are hungry?" Olive asked, in a hushed voice.

"I ain't a doubt of it."

"It's a terrible thing to think of!"

"An' worse to endure."

"Are you hungry?" the girl demanded, with striking earnestness.

"Can't say I be. I ain't got a family ter support."

"And what if you had?"

"Ef I couldn't feed 'em in one way, I would in another!"

"How?"

"Wal, I ain't got the family," was the evasive reply.

"I hear a good deal about the poverty of these people, but I have found it hard to believe they were as bad off as report says. This is a land which should be one of plenty."

"So it should; so it should! But it ain't, in Sahara. I tell ye, the camp is well named; it's a desert an' a den o' sufferin'. Thar is men an' women hyer who hev ter scrape their pootiest ter keep the wolf from the door an' the undertaker from their cabin. Hunger walks abroad by night an' day, an' it pinches more folks than you are aware of, miss."

Olive listened with rapt attention and a curious, uncomfortable thrill. The assertions were all the more startling because he who made them was a thoroughly practical man; one she had known long, and rarely seen moved out of his almost sluggish composure.

His name was Benoni Lyon, but the last name was seldom heard in Sahara. Few would have recognized him by it, but mention "Big Benoni," and no one would be at loss.

His stature was something striking in the extreme. He stood six feet in his boots, but seemed far more than that. He was broad in proportion, yet this did not detract from his height. In brief, he was a physical giant.

As to his nature, it was uprightness itself. No one would ever have thought of suspecting him of any transaction out of the track of honor. There were, it must be admitted, some who did not think him capable of anything dishonest, but they misjudged his plain, straightforward nature.

Olive waited so long before making an answer, that Benoni changed the subject.

"This affair draws 'em about all, miss."

"I—I notice Gurdon Forrest isn't here," returned Olive, in a low tone.

"That's a fact."

"Isn't he coming?"

"I don't believe so."

"He never has stayed away before."

"No."

Big Benoni seemed to meditate on the fact; then he slowly added:

"I don't exactly know what to make of Gurdon."

Olive was all interest at once.

"How so?" she asked, with her voice as carelessly pitched as possible.

"Wal, he sort o' put me off in this. I ain't seen much o' him fer some days past. Last night I met him over near Damon's, an' I spoke o' the ball. It never occurred ter me that he wouldn't go, an' I took fer granted he was goin' an' spoke accordin', but I got a setback."

"In what way?"

"Wal, he was as grouty ez you please. I didn't git much out o' him, an' what I did git didn't amount ter much."

"What did he say?"

"I don't jest remember the words, but he fired 'em at me as if they was bullets. 'A murrain on the Mutual Ball!' sez he; 'don't talk ter me about it. I ain't one o' them who want to go an' dance like mad when ruin hangs around us!'"

"What did he mean by that?" Olive inquired, trying to be quiet and unconcerned in manner.

"I don't know, unless he's got all broke up over the sorrows of our people."

"Has he any plan of relief?"

Thus far Big Benoni had been talking with his eyes constantly cast down, the attitude being one of deep thought and dejection; but he now looked up with wonder pictured on his face.

"Bless me! what could one o' us do? Ain't the miners all been studyin' on the point fer years, an' never seen no way out? Ef a remedy had been at hand, we would hev found it long ago. Starvin' men think quick—especially, them who hev wives an' children."

"Gurdon may have thought of some new plan, after all. Was his manner hopeful?"

"Hopeful! It was desperate; jest like the manner of a man who had stood all he could, an' had some wild and headlong scheme in mind fer relief."

Why Big Benoni made this comparison he could not have told. He spoke like a man communing with himself, only. When he had used the words, their full force dawned upon him,

and he grew alarmed, not because he had betrayed a known secret, for this he had not; but because he was aware that nobody knew what might occur at Sahara, and—this girl was Hammond's niece!

"That's a joke, of course," he added, weakly.

Olive knew it was not a joke. More than that, she was more than ever alarmed. What did Gurdon Forrest have on his mind? When he shut his best friends out of his confidence, and acted as if there was some "wild and headlong scheme" in view, there was certainly cause for fear. Her heart was heavy in her breast.

Now that Benoni had grown cautious he wished to drop the subject, and Olive made no remonstrance. Indeed, it had grown as repugnant to her as any subject could be.

Big Benoni bestirred himself and spoke of dancing, and this time Olive did not object. They went to the floor, and she did her part, but never before had she danced when the exercise was so much a parody on mirth and a ghastly farce.

The next hour had its history, and some there were happy. The ball went gayly on. Hammond was smiling and sociable, and the others tried to forget they were beggars and to enter duly into the spirit of the occasion. At last the time came when Hammond called the attention of all in a loud voice.

"Friends," he shouted, "the hour grows late; the hand of the clock points to a part of the dial which admonishes us it is time to adjourn. Let there be one more dance; then we will wend our way homeward with light hearts and sleepy heads. May you all rest well and be full of blessings, is my sincere wish. Now, on with the dance!"

His smile was like the rays of the rising sun, and there was some applause from those who believed in him. The dancers took their places.

"Verily," quoth he, addressing a small group, "it warms my old heart to see these young folk enjoy themselves. Blessed is youth. Blessed is the morn of life, when the blood flows like rich red wine and the mind is free from the canker of sorrow!"

Good Mr. Hammond spoke with unction, and he looked up at the ceiling as if he saw all these poetic sentiments inscribed there in letters of gold.

"Never was a truer sentiment more loftily expressed," asserted Daniel Wayland, admiringly.

"We trip the light fantastic toe," pursued Thomas, "and there is none to molest or make us afraid."

No one! There was a stir at the door, a backward rush of the dancers, a series of screams from the girls, and then into the sight of all came a strange and ghastly figure; a man whose face was red with his own blood!

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE SCENE OF CALAMITY.

WHEN the first thrill of dismay had passed the dancers ceased to utter any cry. Instead, an ominous hush settled over the whole party. The sight was one which startled the oldest person present.

The man who had so unceremoniously been introduced to their presence was then, at least, of a type not common to Sahara. Where broils were almost unknown a man bathed in blood created almost as much consternation as he would have done under similar circumstances in the peaceful East.

Truly, he was a grim and shocking figure. His face was so smeared with blood as to be shocking to delicate tastes, and as he stood there he looked like one at the point of dissolution. He tried to stand erect, but wavered on his feet and seemed liable to fall at any moment.

He was returning the gaze fixed upon him, but his eyes had a glassy appearance which was striking in the extreme.

Some of those nearest him gradually recovered a measure of their scattered wits, and with the recovery came recognition.

"Why, it's Meek Moses!" exclaimed one.

The speech spread, and all soon knew that the ghastly-looking man was one of their own townsmen.

He, too, recovered the power of motion. Arousing, and bestirring his energy, he took a step forward toward Thomas Hammond.

"Boss," he exclaimed in a husky voice, yet so audibly that all could hear, "there has awful work been done in Sahara this night! Look at these wounds o' mine! I'm a wreck, an' it's a wonder I'm here ter tell the story. My train was attacked goin' over the mountain, an' you see how it left me. I'm sore smitten, an' Hinch Trim is a dead man, I reckon!"

At that moment Hammond did not seem to have the quickness of wit that usually marked his manner, and he stood still and stared at the blood-smeared messenger. Some one else managed to ask:

"Why should you be attacked?"

"'Twas a road-agent who did it!"

"A road-agent?" gasped the inquirer, in consternation.

"Yes; an' he's killed me!"

Meek Moses reeled, tried to regain his balance, and then fell heavily to the floor.

"Merciful heaven!" uttered a member of the party, and the cry, vague as it really was, would have fitted well in the mouth of any one present.

The red-faced man on the floor was an awful sight, but they were not allowed to look their fill at him. Thomas Hammond suddenly recovered his presence of mind, which had just been shaken as it never had been before.

"Clear the hall!" he shouted. "Let every one go home except those who have business here. Go! Go at once! Get you gone!"

He waved his arms and acted as if trying to drive out a flock of sheep, while his manner was imperious and his voice harsh.

"You need some of us to help," began one of the miners; but Thomas interrupted him almost fiercely.

"I only want Wayland and Damon. All the rest get out. Go! go! Would you suffocate this man? Give him air. Stand back! Get out! get out!"

It was an unusual thing to see Mr. Hammond lose his calmness, and this impressed upon the minds of the people the fact that this was a very extraordinary and serious affair. Those who had begun to recover from their first shock were frightened anew, and most of them set out to obey the last order in a dazed state of mind.

Equally dazed, but motionless, Olive stood and looked at fallen Moses Smith in a species of horror. Why she was so deeply affected she could not have explained, unless it was because of the mood she had been in when the shock came.

Now, though Meek Moses was a man she always had regarded with instinctive doubt and dislike, she felt more than shocked by his condition. She had feared a calamity, and one had come.

Had she cause to be interested in it?

The idea appeared absurd, yet she could not banish it.

So deeply was she engrossed, so intently did she gaze at the prostrate man, she was not aware that the hall had been nearly emptied, until her uncle came to her side.

"Girl," he said, somewhat sharply, "why do you linger here?"

She aroused with a start; she brushed her hand nervously across her face.

"Don't you see all the others have gone?" Hammond added.

"I did not see it."

"You see it, now."

"Uncle, what is this horrible thing?" the girl demanded, feverishly.

"If you mean the wounding of this man, you use an exaggerated term. He has had some fight, and is slightly wounded; that's all."

"What did he mean by speaking of his 'train,' and by mentioning a road-agent?"

"How should I know? Very likely the man is out of his head. Yes, yes; that's it!" Mr. Hammond decided, evidently thinking his explanation a happy one. "Of course he imagined all these things. Certainly!"

"I do not think so."

"You don't? What do you know about it?"

"Nothing. I wish I did."

"Nonsense! Your nerves have been all upset by this affair. Now get away and let us attend to the man. Don't you see he is wounded—"

"Wounded by whom?"

"Girl, you will drive me frantic. Am I to be bothered by such childish questions? No, by heavens! I will not! You would drive a saint to wrath. Go!"

This time he took Olive by the arm and led her forcibly out of the room. He and his chosen workers were left alone with the wounded man.

Olive did not go far away; she lingered close to the door; she listened eagerly for what more she could hear. From the miners there was enough. They were much stirred up by the event.

"A road-agent near Sahara!" exclaimed one. "Well, I never thought to live to see that! What could any man in his right mind expect to steal near *this* camp?"

"Probably the road-agent was a myth," another man suggested.

"Meek Moses may be out of his head."

"Not much! He's as clear in mind as he ever was. That's plain to be told. He believed all he said, too."

"It's my opinion he was attacked by some one right here in Sahara," suggested a third speaker.

"Why do you think so?"

"Strangers are scarce around these parts, for every one knows thar ain't enough money in camp to buy a yaller dog. It's my belief Moses was done up by some one who knew him well."

This theorist had advanced no logical reason, yet, for some cause, his suggestion found believers. Several men admitted he was probably right.

All this Olive heard. She was not in mood to weigh evidence calmly, so she accepted the opinions of the men as quite true. They gave her further shock, and her heart lay heavier.

than ever in her bosom. Who was this assailant? The question occurred to her, and as an answer came recollection of Gurdon Forrest and his mysterious manner of the night.

No one, men or women, was inclined to go away. All lingered outside the door, eager to hear more. Finally, one of them made a discovery. He hastened to make it known.

"Say, you keep still an' we can hear what is goin' on. The winder is a little ajar. Hush up an' we'll soon know all. Moses is back in his senses again."

Silence fell upon the party. All could not hear, but they had faith in the readiness of their fellows to tell the story as soon as it was known.

Now, of all the persons present, Olive had the most favorable opportunity to listen. She had not noticed it before the miner spoke, but she now seized upon the chance without remembering that, as the representative of her uncle, she was, perhaps, called upon to help keep sacred a conversation from which Thomas Hammond had barred all outsiders.

She thought only of herself.

The sound of voices was very distinct.

"Gather your wits together," directed Hammond, in tones so peremptory as to be almost indistinguishable as his own. "State in a few words just what has happened."

"They laid fer us, an' tackled us from ambush," explained Moses, in a hoarse voice. "They was masked, an' we couldn't see their faces, but they was demons. They held us up, an' demanded that we let them see what he had in the wagon. Wal, we wa'n't built that way, so we jest give them fight."

"And when it was two to two, did you let them beat you?" demanded Hammond, savagely.

"Boss, hear me out!" Moses implored. "So it was two ter two at the start, but it was a devil of a fight. They was perfect tigers. Wal, we was sorter holdin' our own when out o' ambush leaped another man, an' at us he come like a fiend. Now, we wa'n't no more than human, an' we don't pretend ter be; the new feller took us when we was tired out, an' he got in his work beautiful!"

"But the result?—the result, man?"

"You see me! Am I had enough? Wal, I jest reckon Hinch Trim is a dead man, by thunder!"

"And the train?—the train?"

"Gone, I reckon!"

Then the listeners heard an exclamation from Mr. Hammond which seemed by far too strong for one so truly good to use. It expressed anger—some thought, dismay.

"I got away by a hair," Moses pursued. "I finally fell down, an' they took me ter be dead, so I was left alone. I seen a hoss close at hand, one o' theirs, o' course; an' I managed ter git ter it, mount ter the saddle an' ride away. Hyer I be; I can't answer fer Hinch Trim."

"But these men—who could they have been?"

"Members o' this camp!"

"How do you know?"

"I heard one o' them say ter the other—I refer ter them two who begun the fight—he says ter t'other: 'You take care of Moses!' He knowed us, sure. See?"

"The voice! Was it no clew?"

"Not a bit. I didn't recognize it, an' they was so well disguised that a man wouldn't know his own brother. Still, there's a bit of a clew. One was short an' stumpy, while t'other was more slender. The last was the boss; he gave the orders. I take it he was a young feller. He seemed like it, anyhow."

At this point the listeners suffered a check. Wayland noticed the window was ajar, and very promptly closed it. If he saw the persons outside, he gave no token of the fact.

All this Olive had heard. She heard, and every word went home with striking effect. The masked leader who seemed young—who was he? She shivered and turned away. She came face to face with—

Gurdon Forrest was there!

CHAPTER V.

THE RED SIGN.

THE miner's coming had been quiet, yet Olive knew very well he had but just arrived. This was to be seen in various ways. It was doubtful, however, if any one else had noticed the fact that he had not been present all the while.

As she thus faced him she stopped short. It was an encounter which tried her unstrung nerves anew. Only by a strong effort did she repress an inclination to scream.

It was like confronting a ghost.

Gurdon was not so much moved. His forehead was knit until he looked the typical corsair, but he was as calm as ever. He met her gaze unwaveringly. He did not speak, however, and she could not.

After that first instinctive glance he did not seek her gaze, but stood and listened to the talk of the miners. It was all of the recent events, and if Gurdon really had been away, he was soon enlightened as far as the gossiping of the party could inform him.

He listened to all. He was very attentive, but himself had nothing to say.

"It ain't possible!" declared one of the men. "It surely never was one of our people. What! one of us turn road-agent? Never! never!"

"It may be so; the young are rash, an' they say it was a young man."

"One o' our young men? It don't seem reasonable."

"If it was, may justice come to him!"

"Ay, ay! The wretch is too base to live. I'll be one to lynch him!"

Olive looked again at Gurdon. His forehead knit in a deeper scowl, but he had nothing to say.

"Mr. Hammond will bring the guilty ones to justice," asserted one of Thomas's admirers. "He is just the man for the job; he is alert and zealous; and he's shrewd, too. I wouldn't like to be in the shoes of them who did this job!"

"True! Meek Moses is a dying man, and they will swing for it!"

Olive shivered. Not until then did she fully realize what the affair might mean to the "road-agents" of the night. Now, she dared not look at Gurdon. The matter was too horrible. Road robbery, assault and death! What madness had possessed those who had done the deed?

The door of the other room opened suddenly and Hammond reappeared. His face was pale, and he showed emotion not usual to him.

"Men!" he exclaimed, "there has been black work done this night. I have the whole story, now. Moses Smith and Hinch Trim have met with assassins. They had work to do at Beaver Bluff, and to save time, and take advantage of the cool of the hour, they decided to go over by night. They started, but on the way they met with road-agents. You have seen the condition Moses is in. We fear Hinch is even worse off; in brief, there is reason to believe he has fallen victim to the highwayman fiends."

There was a murmur of indignation.

"What is our duty?" added Thomas.

"Lynch them!—lynch them!" shouted the crowd.

Good Mr. Hammond looked gratified.

"All this in due time, fellow-citizens. Our first duty, however, is to see to the living of our own party. Who will go with us to look up Hinch Trim?"

"I will!"

Nearly every man there joined in the chorus of volunteers. The voice of Gurdon Forrest was not heard, however.

"That's it, men; your readiness is very gratifying. I will take—"

Thomas looked over the group to get his helpers. Perhaps it was but natural, but he chose only those who had always been prompt to shout for him in the darkest days of Sahara's history. Again was Gurdon a nonentity.

As Hammond turned away, after making his selection, the movement of the restless crowd brought Olive and Gurdon so close to each other that their garments touched. From that contact the young miner shrunk away without any visible reason, and then tried to smile.

Some strange feeling about her hand caused Olive to raise that member and look for the cause. She was not at loss for the explanation. When it was had her very flesh seemed to grow chill.

Upon that hand was a damp stain, and its color was red.

It was blood!

Blood, and it had been transferred to her hand when she chanced to touch Gurdon's coat sleeve!

White grew her face, and as the hand was held between herself and the miner, he, too, saw the tell-tale stain. He looked at it with dilated eyes. Guilty or innocent, the sight startled him.

That hand, if long held there in its present condition, might have done fatal damage, but the emergency quickened Olive's wits. It must be freed from all signs before any one else saw it. She made one quick moment and wiped the red smear away on her dress. Gurdon started.

"Paint!" he muttered, in confusion.

Olive looked at him in silence; she could not speak.

"Some improvements are being made, you know, and—"

Thus far had the miner gone with his explanation when another stir of the crowd separated them. Gurdon did not seem to regret the change, nor did he seek her side to say more about the red mark.

As for Olive, she no longer asked herself if he could have been one of the road-agents. He had his peculiarities, like every one else, but subterfuge or evasion never had been among them. Instead, his candor had always been marked until that night. The sudden change was ominous.

The search-party was soon ready. Hammond did not accompany it. Wayland was a younger man, so he went with the searchers, while Thomas remained with Moses Smith. With him, too, was the Samaritan of Sahara. The latter's skill as a physician had never been more needed. Moses, since his story was told, had exhibited signs of collapse, and Doctor Littlefinger was putting into him some of the strongest stimulants in use in medical lore.

"It's a hard battle," Saul confessed, to Hammond. "I doubt if his life can be saved, but we will fight it out to the end. He is sorely wounded, but he has one chance in about a dozen."

"If he dies, there'll be a murderer in Sahara."

"Too true!" sighed the good doctor.

"That man shall suffer the extreme penalty!" declared Hammond; "he shall swing if I give a year to hunting him down!"

"Well spoken, friend; well spoken! You show noble zeal to wish to care for your humble followers," approvingly returned Spokane.

The doctor's verdict on Moses soon spread, and it was known that in all likelihood, the highwaymen were to be classed as murderers, whether Hinch Trim was found alive or dead.

In the mean while, the party led by Wayland had started on their mission. Their course was through the heart of the camp, and thus it was that, as they went, they passed the one store of the place. Reaching this point, they were stirred to action by observing something beside the shed which adjoined the larger building.

"Who's out with a team?" demanded Wayland. "We'll look into this!"

He went forward quickly; then came to a sudden halt.

"Thunder!" he ejaculated. "It's their own outfit!"

All there recognized the outfit as the joint property of Moses and Hinch, and their wonder grew.

"A runaway!" Wayland decided. "Look at them! They're dripping with sweat. Yes; that's it. When the fight took place they must have run like mad, and here they are."

"Trim ain't here."

"No."

Wayland seemed to have unusual cause for thought, for he meditated deeply until one of his party went to the rear of the vehicle, to put the flap aside and look within. Then Mr. Wayland astonished him by a push which almost flung him to the ground.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, sharply.

"Why, I was goin' ter look in."

"You mind your own affairs!"

Wayland spoke rudely, but almost immediately noticed the honest offender's look of amazement.

"Excuse me, friend," the secretary added. "I am nervous, now. Of course, however, this is not our property. Nothing is inside, for the owners were going empty to Beaver Bluff. The team must be seen to, though. Andrew Damon, remain here and look to it!"

"All right."

Damon answered readily, and then Wayland got the rest of his men under way in quick order and left the place. Damon, thus left in charge, only waited to see the others out of sight; then crawled quickly into the vehicle.

"Gone!" he muttered. "Gone, by the howl-in' demons!"

He fumbled around for some time longer, but only succeeded in getting proof of his own statement. Whatever he may have hoped to find was not there; the wagon was wholly empty.

Then Andrew made other remarks. Their exact purport may be inferred when it is said that the profanity thereof would have put ordinary expressions of rage, disappointment and calamity to the blush for weakness. What interest he had in the "empty" wagon with which Moses and Hinch had started for Beaver Bluff did not appear.

When able to command his feelings somewhat he looked the outfit over. The horses were wet with sweat, but had recovered from all fright, and did not seem the worse for their wild race.

He then went out in the road and looked up the range, toward where Wayland and his men had gone.

Sahara was a desert financially to the miners, but not otherwise, for instead of sandy wastes and dead levels, it was on the side of the great mountains. Far above reared the topmost peaks; far below were the valleys which led to the eastern plains.

It was upward that the rescue party had gone, and the scene in that direction was grand and rugged.

Toiling up this ascent, the party led by Wayland suddenly perceived a man advancing toward them.

"It must be one of the outlaws!" exclaimed the leader. "Cover him with your guns, and shoot him down if he tries to escape!"

The rescuers grew excited. The opinion was general that the road-agents were to receive a return blow, and the fact was encouraging.

"Better give him a volley, anyhow!" suggested one.

"I'll bail him," amended Wayland. "Halt, there! Stand where you are, or you are a dead man. Halt, I say!"

The man had paused at the first challenge.

"Wal, ain't I a-bailin'?" he demanded irritably. "Who in thunder are you, an' what do you want?"

"Surrender, or you are a dead man!"

"Surrender fer what?"

"Because we want to know who you are."

"You gol-dasted fools! don't you know al—"

ready? Or have you lost all the brains you ever had? Durn ye fer a pack o' howlin' idiots!"

This outbreak would hardly have been called parliamentary, by finical persons, but it had its effect. Several men exclaimed as one:

"It's Hinch Trim!"

CHAPTER VI.

IN UTTER MISERY.

THERE was a general shout of welcome, and the party hastened toward their comrade. Trim's anger suddenly disappeared.

"Howlin' cyclones!" he ejaculated. "I've had the worst time on record. I've been drawn through a knot-hole an' skinned! I've met with a fight an'—"

"Yes, yes; we know!" interrupted Wayland. "Moses has shown up at the village. Don't try to talk. We know how you started for Beaver Bluff, to do some trading and save the time it would take to go by day. That we all know, and that you came to grief is equally known to us. Moses has told all. Don't try to talk until you have had a rest!"

Mr. Wayland accompanied this address with divers secret motions, and Hinch seemed to understand.

"Moses probably has told it all straight," he agreed.

"He has," Wayland assured. "Now, Hinch, sit right down here and rest. Is there any hope of catching the outlaws, if we move promptly?"

"Not unless they're dumfounded fools; they've had time enough ter git well away, ye see."

"Men," spoke the leader, peremptorily, "scatter and search every foot of the way. I'll stay an' minister to Hinch. Make haste, now!"

The order was so forcibly given that the miners obeyed, though nobody exactly knew what was expected of them. Then Wayland turned to his remaining follower.

"Hinch, in the fiend's name what has happened?" he cried.

"The train has been robbed!"

"Ay, but by whom?"

"That I don't know."

"And the contents?—what of that?"

"The hosses run away with the wagon. Where they went I don't know. I was in hopes they had got back to the camp."

"The outfit is there, but the wagon is empty."

"Destruction! the knaves hev got the plunder!"

"Tell me all about it!"

Hinch heaved a sigh. The matter sat heavily on his mind.

"We drove up the trail, as usual, and all seemed going well, but jest in the Punch-Bowl we was attacked. Who did it I don't know. Two men leaped from ambush an' went fer us. Me an' Moses fought 'em hard, but they was like demons. Then, as ef it wa'n't bad enough already, out come another feller an' sailed inter us like mad. I can't say how Moses got on, but they jest knocked me silly. I got a clip that stunted me, an' down I fell an' didn't know no more till the whole gang but me was gone. Ez I got up I looked around an' see I was all alone."

"Nothing left on the scene?"

"Nothin' but me an' that hurt."

Hinch revealed a ragged wound on his temple. "Do I understand the hosses ran away when the fight was in progress?"

"Wal, they didn't exactly run, or wasn't doin' so when I see them last; but they went off o' themselves while we was a-scrappin'."

"The wagon is at the camp, empty. Can it be the original robbers failed to get the—you know?"

"Yes, I know, fer it's cost me a broken head. Wal, I don't reckon nobody but the originals got the—you know! Ef the hosses didn't git up more speed it wouldn't be hard ter go on an' ketch 'em."

"And the contents of the wagon are gone?"

"All gone!" admitted Hinch, with a groan.

"Malediction! what an awful calamity!"

"Right ye be, boss."

Hinch agreed readily, and there was no way of doubting his good faith. Wayland would as soon have thought of suspecting himself.

"Robbed!" repeated the secretary. "Great heavens! what will the morrow bring to us?"

"You don't think it was any one that'll give us away?" demanded Hinch, in sudden alarm. "It must hev been road-agents."

"What would send road-agents to Sahara?"

"Ef it wa'n't them, it may hev been somebody who'll give us away!"

"Hinch, have you no idea whatever who it was?"

"Not a bit; but it was some one in this camp, I do believe. Now I think of it, I heerd one o' them call my name or Moses's. Say, ef it was a Sahara man, it'll be all over camp!"

"What I fear, what we all fear, is that it was an attack brought about by suspicion of us. Somebody may be onto our whole game. Now, we have work to do after this. We must be as cunning as serpents, and the robbers must be run down and lynched as road-agents and attempted murderers. See?"

"That's the figger!"

Hinch seemed considerably relieved, but Way-

land did not let any time go to waste. He kept on talking until he had cautioned and re-cautioned the follower, and made him repeat the story thus told. It was the same which had been given out before as Meek Moses's account of the adventure on the mountain. By that time the searchers were back without any report from the road-agents, but as Wayland had expected none, he took the defeat calmly.

All started for the camp.

By the time that place was reached, the news was generally known—known as the rulers saw fit to have it go.

Interest, however, did not flag, and but few of the miners had sought their homes. Instead, they remained around in groups and discussed the affair.

To them it was startling. Sahara never had endured an epidemic of outlawry, and it was a shock to them that men had been robbed on the public trail. Nearly all were outspoken in denunciation of the "crime."

The only new event was that Moses, being in an extremely precarious condition, was to remain at Hammond's home until he recovered or died of his injuries.

This was voted a very kind act on the part of the father of the camp.

The greatest sensations must have a lull, and after a long while, the people drifted slowly homeward. It seemed as if Sahara was a sleeping town. All were not in a mood for rest, though, and at a very late hour two persons met in an out-of-the-way place. They were Gurdon and his ally, Puyallup Peter.

The latter drew a long breath as he joined Forrest.

"Wal, I'll be durn!" he exclaimed.

"We are not yet behind prison-bars!" added Gurdon, abruptly.

"Not yet," Peter admitted, cheerfully.

"Are you prepared for it?"

"I'd prefer a reprieve, b'durn!"

"We stand as declared outlaws to-night. What have we to show for it? Where is the reward of outlawry?"

"Not in my pockets."

"Nor in mine. We know this of each other. Come what may, we know we have been true to each other, for we were all the while together. We cannot have acted the traitor."

"Fact, b'durn!"

"Let this be our consolation if the ruling powers get at the truth and arrest us. Now, will they do this?"

"Gurd, they're goin' ter try their very pootiest."

"Beyond doubt. This we were prepared to expect from the beginning. We knew we should stir up a hornets' nest. We had considered success and failure alike. Yet we did not consider the facts which now confront us."

"Another bull's-eye! Let her go, Gurd!"

Puyallup Peter was his old, nonchalant self. Nothing could shake his airy composure. With Gurdon it was different. He was not of a frivolous disposition at any time, and now he was all bound up in the matter nearest his mind. To him it was a most bitter and all-absorbing reality. He spoke with suppressed vehemence; he scowled at the night as at a personal foe; he felt a keenness of disappointment which made the personal danger seem small.

He had aimed to save Sahara, and he had failed.

"No, we did not foresee this," he went on. "We succeeded in overcoming the guard, yet we have nothing to show for it. We have not a ray of proof that Hammond and his fellows are knaves, but we have, nevertheless, done that which may take us to the gallows-tree and the lyncher's hands!"

"Let Tom Hammond and his gang git onter our work an' we go that way," Puyallup admitted.

"We haven't the contents of the wagon. Who has?"

"I ain't got a ghost of an idee."

"If they are puzzled, what of us? I would give all my worldly possessions to know who the fifth fighter was at the Punch-Bowl."

"He was a screamer! He got away with the treasure, an' where do we come in? We ain't in, at all; that's what's the matter with our side."

"The fellow has the dust. He slipped away from the scene of the fight like a shadow. Of course he hastened after the horses. He came up with them, of course, and secured the plunder. We have risked reputation, honor, friendship,—the miner hesitated over the word, as if it called up unpleasant memories—"we have risked life, itself; and we have lost all and gained nothing!"

"Correct!"

"Who is the winner?"

"For one, I ain't got a ghost of an idee. Have you?"

"I have not."

"It's an awful strange thing. How could that feller pop out at jest the right minute and snatch victory out o' our grasp?"

"Either it was a remarkable chance, which is not likely, or he was there for the same purpose, or—he had previously learned of our intentions."

"Great guns! then he knows all about us, now!"

"He surely does, if the last possibility is correct."

"This gives me a creepy feelin'!"

"You are a brave man, Peter, and I don't hesitate to say we may yet come to the lyncher. Let Hammond suspect the truth and we are gone if he can work our ruin; and his power is almost boundless."

Puyallup shook his head gloomily. At that moment he did not feel like joking. The danger was too near. He put his hand to his neck.

"Durn me ef I don't feel the noose draw, now!" he asserted.

Gurdon did not heed the exclamation. He knew the miner well. Peter was eccentric, but he was as brave as a lion.

They considered the matter in all its bearings, but failed to get any consolation. From the moment when the unknown appeared, and so strangely took the game out of their hands, they had been helpless actors in the drama. Unless they could grasp the mystery they must go on in the same way.

Go on to what?

The question suggested nothing pleasant.

Earnestly they tried to get at the secret of the unknown's identity.

Who was he? What would he do, now that he had the game all to himself? Would he betray them?

The next day would be big with importance to them.

Already they had searched for the lost treasure. No more could be done. They went home to await the inevitable.

CHAPTER VII.

GURDON'S DANGER.

THOMAS HAMMOND had reached the mature age of forty-eight years. He was lucky, or the reverse, as one might look at it, in being the husband of a young wife. Mrs. Pearl Hammond had seen only thirty years. She was not especially popular in Sahara. She never had associated to any great extent with the common people, and common people hold such exclusiveness as a capital crime.

Mrs. Pearl was not troubled by their dislike. On the contrary, it did not give her a serious thought. They were quite right in thinking she considered herself their superior in all ways. Holding this view, she accepted any chance willingly which put a barrier between herself and them.

On the previous night she had not been at the ball. The alleged reason was that she was indisposed.

It was worthy of notice that Mrs. Pearl always was indisposed when the periodical balls took place.

Nor having indulged in this mild dissipation, she came down-stairs the next morning looking fresh and blooming. It had always been a question in her mind whether people regarded her or her husband's niece, Olive, as the better looking. To this matter she had given much thought. In her own opinion there could be no comparison, and she settled the question in her own favor with characteristic modesty; but opinions differed, she was aware. Some one might think the reverse, though it would be an instance of very poor judgment.

Thus thinking, it was seen that her modesty did not lead her into wild errors of flattery to another.

This morning, entering the dining-room, she found Olive already there. Olive did not look blooming. When it was remembered she was but twenty years old, one might well wonder that keeping late hours should cause her to appear so haggard. It never had, before. Now, she seemed scarcely to have slept at all.

Mrs. Pearl greeted her husband's niece graciously. Then her eyes suddenly grew bright.

"I hear you had some excitement, last night," she remarked.

"They did," amended Olive, emphasizing the word "they," she knew not why.

"My maid has told me. I almost wish I had been there!"

"You? Why?"

"The excitement!" declared Mrs. Pearl, waving her fair hand. "When has the like been heard of in Sahara? Truly, there is hope for the dullest place the sun ever shone on! Bravo! we live when we can have a road-agent! Bravo!"

Olive regarded Mrs. Pearl in wonder. That estimable lady was rarely moved out of her icy composure.

"It was not pleasant for the men attacked by the road-agents," the girl remonstrated.

"Oh! but think of the bliss enjoyed by the robber! Why, he should wax fat on such a treat!"

Olive did not know what to make of this mood, so she only looked at her relative-in-law and said nothing.

"I am going to have some sport out of this!" added Mrs. Pearl.

"In what way?"

"I know who did the robbing!"

"You do?"

"Surely! It was a man I am not reluctant to strike, too. You have heard of one Gurdon Forrest, haven't you?"

Olive's heart seemed to stop its beating.

"What of him?" she asked, faintly.

"The robber, innocent; the robber! I have the game all in my own hands. No one but me suspects the truth. Won't it be a rare event for me?"

"Surely," returned the girl, still more faintly, "you are jesting."

"I am not, surely. Hear me, if you are skeptical. Yesterday, I was out, as you well remember. I was called to see Damon's wife, who was taken suddenly ill—very inconsiderate of her, as it broke up my afternoon nap. On my way home I saw this impertinent Gurdon Forrest and another man; I know not whom, as I did not see him clearly. They had been having a secret conversation, the drift of which I did not catch at the time, though I see more clearly, now."

"Then you have no proof?" cried Olive, catching at the straw.

"Who said I hadn't? I say I have!"

"Go on!" was the low-voiced direction.

"Well, I heard Forrest say to the other fellow: 'Remember, it's to-night at the Punch-Bowl! Fail not, and come well armed!'"

"That may have meant nothing," suggested Olive.

"Nothing? Then why was it said? Don't be a dunce! At that time I cared nothing for the business they had in hand; I did not give it a serious thought. Now, it is very different."

"What if he was at the ball?" demanded Olive, wondering if she could, if she dared, to swear Gurdon on to safety.

"He was not at the ball. Last night I sat at the window and saw him go past. He and the other man were on their way toward the upper range. All this I saw plainly, and it would be a bold person who would say there is nothing in it."

"Have you—have you told Uncle Thomas?"

"No. I am going to have a more dramatic revelation. This morning, I am told, all the people meet at Damon's to sit in judgment on this audacious road-agent, and to offer views, theories, suspicions and what-not. I shall be there. I will let the common herd say their little nothing; then I will rise in all my glory—*presto!* and I shall be a great woman, and—I shall be revenged!"

"On whom?"

"This audacious robber aforesaid. I have a bone to pick with Mr. Gurdon Forrest. You may never have known it—though, now I reflect, I remember you and Forrest have often been together—you may, or may not, know that insolent Gurdon once took me to task for being, as he alleged, indifferent to the suffering poor of this camp, wearing diamonds when they had not bread enough to eat. Ah! it's a long road that has no turning, Master Gurdon!"

"Would you betray him, now, merely out of revenge?" demanded Olive with rising indignation.

"I would, surely. What else does his impertinence merit? What is it to me whether the common herd live or starve? It's their fault not mine, that they are alive."

Olive never had been on intimate terms with her step-aunt; their natures were not alike, and it was agreeable to both to keep well apart. Hence, neither had influence with the other, and the girl knew her most eloquent and earnest pleas would be thrown away if uttered. She wisely decided to hold her peace. The only result of interfering would be to raise actual suspicion in Mrs. Pearl's mind that there was more than casual acquaintance between the step-niece and Gurdon.

"Yes," Hammond's wife went on, after a pause, "I am on the eve of revenge. I will send insolent Forrest to the prison pen. Or," she added as an afterthought, "to the lynchers! They may take a hand."

The idea was one which made her look serious for a moment, and Olive ventured a word further:

"Would you do that?"

"I would. Why not? The fellow, a mere miner, dared to take me to task, as if I were a child—*me!* Think of it!"

Olive had something more important to think of. For Mrs. Pearl's injured feelings she cared nothing, but for Gurdon—that was different. And well she knew if suspicion was once started matters would go fast and hard against the miner. It would not be difficult, she thought, to show that he had not been at the ball. After that—well, with suspicion once started, lynchers need but little proof, or what seems like it. The outlook was most dark.

What little courage had been hers before was all gone as she turned away from her step-aunt. Surely, Gurdon was doomed when he had such a vindictive, yet unjust, foe to tell of petty facts.

Olive had no appetite for breakfast that morning. She was glad her uncle was not present, for she dreaded any more prying eyes. It was bad enough to have Mrs. Pearl sit there in her vivacious mood of waiting for a victim.

While she ate, Olive formed an idea. It took shape as soon as she was through. She put on her hat and left the house.

Taking the most direct route, she traversed the camp. Near the further side was the shanty where Gurdon Forrest lived. She entered the place but had a disappointment.

The hut was empty.

Her face grew long and dismal.

"Merciful heavens!" she murmured, "is the last chance gone?"

Returning to the door she looked long and anxiously up and down the trail. None of the mines were to be open, that day, and as he was not at home there was absolutely no clew to where he might be sought for.

The fresh disappointment was more than she felt able to endure. She was well aware that in coming there she had laid the foundation for what might connect her with the guilt of the miner. For that she had cared nothing, but to fail after the sacrifice was another drop in the bucket.

She inquired at the nearest huts, but without avail. Then, aware that she was just as likely to find him in the lower part of the camp, she determined not to linger.

On the rude table were several articles of nominal value. At these she gazed for some time, and then picked up a pencil and a sheet of paper. Thus equipped, she began to write rapidly. She produced the following note:

"TO ONE WHO WILL KNOW:—All is lost! The secrecy for which you hoped is gone. Events are working which will bring you to ruin unless you take prompt action. Heed the warning of a friend, and get to a place of safety without delay. There is no safety for you in Sahara. Flee while you can!"

"A TRUE FRIEND."

This done, she slipped the paper into a recess in the wall. She knew what but few persons did, that Gurdon used this recess as a sort of post-office, and that there was a bare chance he would look there before the hour set for the meeting of the day.

"It is all I can do," she murmured. "I pray I may meet him in the street, but if I don't, may he be so fortunate as to look here. If he does not, may Providence help him!"

Turning, she left the shanty.

She walked backward toward her home, always on the watch for Gurdon, but she did not see him.

The hour for the meeting was close at hand. People were already gathering in groups, and the affair at the Punch-Bowl was the all-absorbing subject of conversation. It was said that Spokane Saul had reported Meek Moses as being in a very precarious condition, and it was the feeling that they were going to sit in judgment on a murderer, rather than a mere road-agent, bad as the latter was deemed.

In due time Olive, not having seen Gurdon, entered the room which the people called the hall, though it was smaller than the name.

Almost the first person she saw was Mrs. Pearl Hammond.

CHAPTER VIII.

WANTED, DEAD OR ALIVE!

OLIVE found a retired spot and sat down to await the result. She did not want any one to address her. For the time being her best friends were like foes, and she only aspired to be unseen and unheard.

The easy manner of her uncle's wife was extremely obnoxious to her. The woman was as composed as if she was not there to swear a fellow-being's life away. She was as reserved as usual, but there could be no doubt that she intended to keep her word, and brand Gurdon with infamy. Olive hated her then; she was a bitter foe, whose capacity for mischief was as boundless as were her ignoble motives.

Later, the girl perceived that her efforts to save Forrest had borne no fruit. He was there; he was within easy reach of the mob, as soon as Mrs. Pearl should brand him.

Once Olive started to get near him, and give a verbal warning, but he changed his position, and went where she could not well follow. She thought it was a deliberate attempt to avoid her. In any case it was successful.

Her work was done.

The blow must fall.

At last Hammond called the meeting to order.

"Friends," he began, in a loud voice, "I need hardly state why we are here. You all know too well. A deed was done last night which has stopped work in the mines, and called us to this place with one all-potent motive to stir our blood. Before last night Sahara was a law-abiding place. Poor we might be, and were, but we were a people who could not be charged with disobeying any law. One night has changed all this. Last night a vile deed was done in our limits. Friends of ours, seeking to work by night so as to give all their time to hard labor and bread-winning by day, were set upon and nearly murdered. The latest report is that Moses Smith will probably die!"

Here Mr. Hammond's voice faltered and shook. There was a thrill of approval. How sympathetic the good man was!

"Our duty," he resumed, "is to hunt down

and punish the red-handed villains, and it is for that purpose we are gathered here now. What course shall we adopt?"

"I move the election of Daniel Wayland as chairman," put in Damon.

No one objected, and the election was duly made.

"Next," remarked Hammond, "it seems proper to me that one of our citizens be chosen to take full charge of this matter, and see to the conduct of the investigation, search and arrest, in due form."

"I move that Doctor Littlefinger be thus elected!" cried Damon, quickly.

There was an appearance as if the leaders of the place had cut and dried the whole affair in advance, but no one objected to the arrangement. The nomination of Spokane Saul was received with a murmur of approval, and he was elected before he fairly had time to accept or decline. He then arose and faced them.

"My friends," he spoke, benignly, "this is an unexpected call to duty. I am in the full sense of the word a private citizen, and as such am opposed to holding any office; but there are times when one's will must bow to the inevitable. This is an occasion made sacred by the innocent blood which has been shed. Outlawry must not flourish in our camp. Believing this, I feel constrained to accept, and to do my best to bring the evil-doers to justice. May the right triumph!"

Some persons might have thought there was a trace of the charlatan in the doctor's speech, if not in his medical trade, but he had few there who were disposed to sit in judgment on trifles. It was generally agreed that he was more than ever fit to be called the Samaritan of Sahara.

The party got to work quickly. Hinch Trim was called to the stand, and he told his story in detail. Nothing new was brought out, but the alleged villainy of the robbers of the Punch-Bowl was made more than ever perceptible to the people.

Then followed a general investigation and discussion in which Spokane Saul never let the fact be lost sight of that he was the presiding officer. In the blandest manner possible, but with constant attention and speech, he ruled the meeting.

If he had not known just what the other leaders expected of him, he was very fortunate in his course, for he never was troubled by them.

Olive found this preliminary very trying. She felt sure the trap was soon to be sprung, and was rather anxious that it should be done and over with.

She watched Mrs. Pearl closely, but that lady kept her handkerchief to her face and, it seemed, was content to wait for a while.

At last Spokane Saul called for all to rise who could throw any light on the subject, or give any suggestion. Again Olive looked at her step-aunt.

The lady stirred with sudden life, but seemed content to let some one else lead the way. It was so with all, however; if any one was possessed of a clew, the fact was not made known in haste. Spokane Saul looked for a witness in vain.

Finally Damon rose.

"With apologies for the suggestion," he began, "I will remind a certain lady here that she did not attend the ball last night. I allude to Mrs. Hammond. When I passed her house I saw her sitting at the window. She had opportunities for observation not possessed by the rest of us. May I be allowed to ask her if she saw aught, or saw any person while at her window, or in any way has any information which will bear upon this subject?"

Mrs. Pearl rose.

Olive held her breath. She thought she saw an understanding between the last speaker and Hammond's wife. Surely, the revelation was at hand. Olive glanced at Gurdon. He was calm but somber-faced.

Spokane Saul bowed gravely.

"Mrs. Hammond, can you help us any?" he asked, politely.

Quietly Mrs. Pearl replied:

"I cannot!"

"You saw nothing from your window?"

"Nothing whatever."

"It would be absurd," pursued the Samaritan, smiling, "to ask if you have any other knowledge of the matter."

"Certainly," agreed Mrs. Pearl, "for I know nothing about it. I am not a road-agent nor a hunter thereof. I can tell nothing about the case, for I know nothing about it!"

She sat down, and Saul bowed deferentially.

"Please pardon us for questioning you, madam; we did it only in the hope of the one chance which often comes to the most retired. Of course you understand that."

It was not an inquiry, but a tribute to the lady, and she bowed in return. Then nearly every one there forgot the mine president's wife as a possible witness in the case.

Olive did not forget. She stared at her step-aunt like one in a dream. Had the chance actually been offered to Mrs. Pearl and declined? Had the coveted revenge been neglected? Had she come all the way to the hall to ruin Gurdon, and then rejected the opportunity?

It was almost incredible.

Olive had waited with her heart palpitating painfully for the revelation. It did not come. Why? Had she really not cared to injure the young miner?

As she looked at Hammond's wife, Olive was suddenly treated to a revelation. Her step-aunt turned her gaze upon Gurdon, and that regard spoke as plainly as words. It was a hostile, a scowling look; a look so full of bitter hatred as to well deserve the term, murderous. She had failed to testify against him, yet her enmity had never before been so strong.

Olive was amazed. What meant this? Why had Mrs. Pearl spared her prey in the hour of triumph: in the hour when the hate in her heart burned the fiercest?

It was an amazing mystery.

Gurdon did not give any evidence that he knew of her presence.

The examination went on in due form, but without any further revelations. All agreed that the evil-doer must be found, but no one appeared to point him out. When it was seen that nothing was to come of this preliminary, Spokane Saul made a suggestion.

"Gentlemen," he observed, looking around benignly, "while I am aware that no one here would be actuated by selfish motives, I will remind you it is usual in such cases to offer a reward for the arrest of the guilty parties. Therefore, I move we take action in the matter."

It was done, and they produced the following paper:

\$500 REWARD!

"The above sum will be paid for evidence which shall lead to the arrest and legal conviction of the parties who recently assaulted and nearly murdered Moses Smith and Hinchman Trim, at the place called the Punch-Bowl. Should the aforesaid guilty persons resist arrest so as to endanger the life of any citizen seeking to execute the decree of justice, the reward will be paid for the persons of the said criminals, dead or alive! Let all good citizens give heed.

S. LITTLEFINGER, Chairman."

After evolving this notice the people felt better.

But Olive was in a mood even more distressed.

"Dead or alive!"

It was a phrase which made her flesh creep.

She wondered that Gurdon did not at once take steps to place himself beyond the reach of the blood-seekers, but he showed no sign of perturbation. Instead, he came out of his gloomy silence and began to talk in a natural way with those around him. He evidently realized the need of caution, and that he must go with the majority in outward show.

There was no more to do, and the meeting broke up.

Olive started for home at once. Her first impulse was to retire to her room and be invisible to all, but the temptation to see Mrs. Hammond again was not to be resisted. She waited for her step-aunt to come in.

That lady came. She was outwardly calm, and removed her outer garments quietly. Olive watched her secretly. Would she have anything to say about the meeting?

Mrs. Pearl sat down. She fell into thought. She meditated in evident forgetfulness of her companion. For some time there was absolutely nothing to tell of emotion, but the girl's espionage was not without its reward. Suddenly a flash of anger broke over Mrs. Pearl's face. Her brows contracted in a dark frown. Her lips were compressed until only a single line marked the place of her mouth. Dark hate was in that look.

It was not the expression of an idea, but simply of rage.

She rose, and then seemed to notice Olive for the first time.

"Ah!" she murmured; then, after a brief pause, she more lightly asked: "Were you at the convention?"

"Yes."

"Interesting, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps so."

"Perhaps so?" Really, you are getting diplomatic! Abandon the role, child! It don't fit you well. Leave diplomacy to those who know the art and—have reason to practice. I know of such!"

So saying, Mrs. Pearl abruptly left the room.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHAIRMAN COLLECTS CLEWS.

DOCTOR LITTLEFINGER left the hall with the air of a man who had done his duty and was buoyed up by the approval of his conscience. He went at once to the place where Moses Smith was suffering from his injuries. The good physician had given strict orders as to what should be done with Mr. Smith. A nurse had been furnished who had often filled a like position, before, with Saul's patients; a man who had considerable skill in the line, but was slightly handicapped by being hard of hearing.

For the time being, all persons were barred out of the room but this nurse and the doctor, himself.

The latter found Moses in a state of mental collapse and bodily fever.

"Oh! I'm glad you've come!" he declared, hoarsely.

"Are you, my poor fellow?"

"Yes, for I am a dying man!"

"Are you worse?"

"A good deal. My whole body is cold, and I can't but just breathe!"

Some persons would have said that Moses was more scared than hurt, but the Samaritan was not of such unsympathetic nature. He made an examination, shook his head and sighed.

"I'm gone ain't I?" demanded Moses, breaking into a perspiration of terror.

"Friend, I can relieve the coldness and difficulty of breathing, but further than that you are in the hands of Providence. That power which notes the fall of the sparrow will not forget you."

"I wish it would!" exclaimed Moses, feverishly and frankly.

"Surely, poor soul, you have nothing on your conscience which is troubling you?" returned the Samaritan, gently.

"I have, I have! I am burnt up with—"

"Remorse?"

"No; with fear of the consequences!" was the reply, made with more than the candor of the ordinary sinner.

"Ah! my brother, shrink not! If you are afflicted, you have but to confess and repent. Confession, dear friend, is the purifier of the sin-stained soul. Believe me, for I know whereof I speak. It is not generally known, here, but I took holy orders in my youth, and am an accredited servant of the church. Lean thy burdens on the cross, Moses; on the cross and—on me; and all will be well with you."

"Can you do that?" cried the miner, eagerly.

"The power is mine, friend."

"Then forgive me, right away!"

"Not so fast, friend. Sin, to be forgiven, must be confessed. My duty to you in the hour of thy distress commands me to make all this plain. An unconfessed sin may find no pardon."

Moses looked troubled.

"Are you sure I am so bad off, an' likely to die?"

"I am skilled in my profession," remarked Spokane Saul, modestly, "and such as I sometimes do great cures, but we can not bring the dying back to health. Verily, brother, it would be well for you to make thy peace with the other world."

Just then the patient had a severe pain, and he was converted in one way, if not in another.

"I will, I will!" he exclaimed. "I want to confess; I want to tell all. "But," he candidly added, after a thoughtful pause, "it will take a long time."

"Boil it down, friend," suggested Spokane.

"Well, I—I haven't always done just right. I have done—"

"Perhaps you have been a falsifier?"

"Yes, yes; I have!" groaned Moses.

"And a user of profanity?"

"Yes; that too."

"And a libeler of your fellow-men?"

"Yes; I've done that, also!" sighed Smith.

"It is sad, but it will do much to purge you of sin that you got your wound in a good cause."

"But I didn't!"

"You did not?"

"No!"

By this time Meek Moses was wrought up to a point where caution was not remembered. He thought only of himself, and, considering his case desperate, his reserve broke all bounds. Excitedly he exclaimed:

"My life has been one of constant sin, but I'm afeard there is nothin' in the whole list that'll weigh ag'in' me like what I've done at Sahara. I've helped ter rob them who trusted ter honesty that didn't exist. It was a craven, sneakin' robbery; an' ef it it would be forgive, all else would be, too."

"Do not yet despair! Remember what confession can do, brother. I bid thee be of good cheer. What has thy evil deed been?"

"I'll tell all!" decided Moses. "The fact is, things have not gone at Sahara as folks think they have. It has all been a fraud and a swindle, and Hammond, Wayland, Damon, Hinch, Trim an' me hev been in it. It ain't true that the mines ain't paid! Ef there had been a fair division, all would have done well an' got rich. The mines hev turned out enough gold fer it, but only a few hev got their share. From the first it was a swindle. Hammond an' his two friends got the Swedes here on purpose ter rob them, an' profit while they grew poor. Hinch an' I was took in because we were practical miners, an' we were the only ones who were. Well, for all these months the yield o' dust has been good, but it has been got out o' town on the sly, an' we hev profited, while the common miners hev got only jest enough ter keep body an' soul together!"

Moses stopped short, out of breath.

Spokane Saul remained calm.

"Yet, there has been a dividend?"

"Jest ter keep them here."

"It was hardly just," decided Saul, sighing.

"I never would hev got this hurt only I was

in bad business. Hinch an' me was takin' away a load of dust when we was set on, an' I got my wound."

"And the gold was lost?"

"All lost."

"Surely, Mr. Hammond must have had some motive for doing all this?"

"He did hev; he wanted ter feather his nest at the expense o' the Swedes. He knew he hadn't a practical miner in the party except them he took inter the plot. So they could not git on ter the game except by chance. He has kept them at the point o' starvation, an' as all their little possessions was put inter the pool at the start, they would hang on as long as there was a ghost of a show. The game has worked well—with all but me! I am a dyin' man, an' the sin is heavy on my soul. Didn't we rob men who was took all at a disadvantage—men who had wives an' children who suffered with them?"

"It was not right," admitted the Samaritan, with a sigh.

"But will I be forgiven? Is there any hope for me?"

"Brother, all things are possible. As long as you remain in a penitential mood you need not fear. Be of good cheer, and make your penitence more sincere with each fleeting hour. Leave the rest to me!"

The Samaritan rose, as if the interview was over, but Moses was not content to have him go. The latter wanted more consolation, and he did not fail to get it. Spokane Saul seemed to be no every-day doer of good. He went right into the heart of Moses's trouble, and as a result the wounded man was cheered up and encouraged wonderfully.

Now, indeed, was he prepared to say the visitor was, of a verity, a Samaritan.

They had just got their affair in the best possible condition when the nurse, who had been busy at a distance, came in to announce that Thomas Hammond was there to see the Samaritan.

He was not kept waiting. Saul went out, and was cordially greeted by the caller.

"I'm glad you're here, doctor," he observed. "I came to see how Moses was getting along, but you can tell me better than he could."

"This is quite true, for I have been ministering to him, both as to body and to spirit," the Samaritan replied.

"As to spirit?" repeated Hammond, with a start.

"Yes. In this hour of his affliction, his conscience has become active and accusing."

Thomas moved uneasily in his chair. Since Saul came to town he had been at all times an active helper of the original masters of Sahara, and Thomas had felt quite sure of him, but this was a very delicate period of history, and the Samaritan's face told no tales.

The mine-president was uneasy.

"Has Moses anything to regret?" he inquired.

"What one of us has not?" asked Saul, looking upward as if for an answer. "Man is a feeble vessel, and prone to wander from the way in which he should tread. Yea, verily!"

"Have you any idea what is troubling Moses?"

"Frankly, he has some doubts if the way in which matters have been conducted at Sahara has been just what one would want to hear of when he should reach the other world. He has explained how you formed this camp and have conducted it, and what part he has had in the affair. Of course this statement included the history of the errand he was on when he and Hinch Trim were attacked at the Punch-Bowl."

"What did he say about that?" asked Thomas, in a low voice.

Spokane Saul smiled slightly.

"He explained what his cargo was on that unfortunate expedition; in brief, Mr. Hammond, he has told all, and he now says he does not think you have done right to help yourself to the lion's share of the gold dug in the limits of Sahara. He evidently feels more like a jackal than a lion now!"

Thomas had always been a man of nerve, but on this occasion there was a peculiar throbbing of his heart, as if he had some serious malady there. He was ill at ease. True, he thought he knew the Samaritan, but he was not sure of it.

As Saul sat there he presented his usual appearance. Personally, he was a man of large frame and abundant flesh. He was round and sleek and pleasing to the eye that loves harmonious curves. His face was in keeping with the rest of his organization. It was round and rosy, as if he liked the good things of life. It was clean-shaven, and destitute of lines and severity.

His age it would be hard to determine. It might be anywhere from thirty to forty-five, for good temper, or something else, had preserved it well. On that face a frown never was seen. Nothing could mar his benign manner.

Sitting opposite Hammond, he had been as placid as usual, and this gentle, Samaritan-like mood had put Thomas in a quandary.

Had he reason to fear censure from the good man, or no?

When the last-recorded pleasantries came, Thomas experienced a feeling of relief. Surely, Spokane would not jest if he was about to set

the seal of his condemnation upon the way of Sahara.

"And what have you said to Moses?" Hammond asked.

"I have pointed out the benefits of repentance to those who have a quickened conscience."

"Do you think he will be forgiven?"

CHAPTER X.

OLIVE MEETS SPOKANE.

HAMMOND anxiously awaited the reply. Spokane Saul, sitting with his chubby hands crossed in front of his generous stomach, remained as mild as ever.

"It seems to me that Moses magnifies the matter," he answered, evenly. "Of course he does not go into the affair as a more intellectual person would. I have always wondered you could afford to do so well by the common miners. They are not skilled workmen, and to divide evenly what comes from the auriferous soil would be to give them the benefit of your experience, without any return. By your peculiar system, you are able to take what toll is right, and they never miss what they do not know they ever had."

A smile broke out on Hammond's face.

"You are a wise man, doctor!" he declared.

"I am more than a theorist. I look beyond the surface."

"And, having learned our secret by this chance, I trust you do not think it necessary to tell the whole town?"

"I should be rash to interfere with your system. It is your affair, not mine, my dear sir."

There was no sly conceit in the speaker's manner. He remained as mild and unmoved as ever, and Thomas mentally hugged himself.

"I think we understand each other."

"Beyond doubt."

"Well, doctor, an ally like you is not to be disdained. Now that chance has made our secret yours, too, let me do what is right. You shall henceforth have a share of the profits accruing to those who are making the most out of the Sahara mines. How does that impress you?"

Spokane Saul meditated.

"I had not thought to become a commercial man, but it is true I have impaired my financial fortunes by treating your people without any pecuniary recompense. Perhaps I ought not to scorn the creature things of life."

Thomas smiled even more broadly. He had suspected for some time that the "Samaritan" was not one averse to feathering his own nest when he had the chance, and now the fact was so strongly corroborated, he was hugely pleased.

"We will do well by you in a financial way, sir."

"Let it be as seemeth best to thee, friend. You will find me a person of discretion."

This time Hammond laughed aloud. There was something very quaint and amusing in Saul's way, and the blandness with which he accepted the chance to share stolen money was an object lesson even to the president of the concern.

They talked further. Hammond spoke with considerable freedom. He defended his course, and claimed to be doing a good work for the Swedes, even if they did not get all that was due them; and he joked in regard to his plot; but the Samaritan did not follow his lead. That individual actually did not seem to see anything wrong in the transaction, and he kept his old serenity at all times. It was exactly the same mood in which Thomas always had seen him before.

It was placidity personified.

When they separated, it was in a frame of mind seemingly satisfactory to both. Thomas was rather glad to have enrolled a man he had always regarded as safe and reliable, for Spokane entered into the daily life of the leaders, and his great popularity with the people made him a dangerous man if he was not safe.

It was a great scoop.

After Hammond was gone the Samaritan saw his patient again, and then left the house. As he passed his fellow townsmen he everywhere was shown the greatest respect. It was no trifling matter to poor people to have a skillful physician who would treat them gratuitously in times of illness, and the Samaritan had a hold upon them which was of steel.

They considered him their good angel.

Walking on, he met Hammond's niece.

"Good-morning, Miss Olive!" was his benign salute. "Are you out on important business?"

"Hardly that, doctor," she replied, smiling faintly.

"Are you not afraid of the road-agents that infest our fair camp, now?"

"Why should they molest me?"

"Why should they not?"

"I do not carry gold or silver."

"Do you think they seek gold?"

"Highwaymen usually do, I believe."

"You are quite right. Yet, all cases are not alike. Perhaps, now, bad as these monsters are, they have friends right here in Sahara."

Olive started. She looked quickly at the Samaritan, impressed with the fear that his speech might mean more than it really conveyed, but he never had looked milder. His gentle gray eyes beamed upon her with amiable light.

"Surely, they cannot be of our people," she finally replied.

"I know not. We cannot always depend upon the evidence of our own eyes. Let us hope, however, we are not with such enemies. As chairman, it is my duty to unearth these unrighteous men, and it would grieve me sorely to see my own neighbors in the toils. However, right will triumph in the end."

The Samaritan folded his hands over his stomach and looked mildly confident.

"If found, what will be done with them, doctor?" inquired Olive, hesitatingly.

"I suppose they will suffer after the fashion of the world, and go to a most unhappy end. You know the way of the West is the way of Judge Lynch."

"Surely, you would not approve of that?—of means so violent?"

"Peradventure, I should not be consulted."

"But if you were? Remember the law forbids violence."

"I hardly think I should interfere in such a matter, much as I should lament the necessity which sent one of my fellow-men to the end of the ungodly."

"Yet men call you good, benevolent, sympathetic."

"I thank you for the statement, Miss Olive. It is grateful to the ear of man to know, not that he is esteemed great, for that were a mere vanity, but that he is regarded as honorable. Honor," averred the Samaritan, in a subdued voice, "is a thing money cannot purchase, and in that it is superior to the alleged lever that moves the world. The world! How much of sin and suffering is embodied in that phrase!"

Spokane Saul seemed inclined to relapse into a melancholy mood, doubtless on account of the wickedness of that world even he could not make perfect, but presently he grew more cheerful.

"I am glad to have met you, Miss Olive," he went on. "I have something to say to you; something which has been on my mind for a time past, and has occupied no small share of my meditations."

He paused, tightened the grasp of his folded hands, and again resumed his placid speech:

"I have been in Sahara for a considerable time, now. I came here because I had heard that these people were in need of aid. My heart bled for them. Poor in temporal goods, far from the rich philanthropists of the so-called civilized world, their lot was a hard one. I was a physician. Could not I relieve their suffering in one way, if not in another? I would try; in my humble way, I would ameliorate their physical pangs. I trust I have done some good."

"Let their grateful praises give you answer. Do they not call you their 'Samaritan,' now?"

"True, true!" admitted Spokane, and he turned his face toward the heavens in meek gratification. Then, after a lull, he continued:

"All these things have been, yet I am not wholly content. There is yet something lacking. I meet my friends on the street and they praise me. All this is pleasant, but when I reach my home I find it dark and drear. No one is there to light the evening lamp, no one to greet me with the voice of heart affection. I am alone!"

There was a transient quiver of the speaker's lip, but it was quickly checked.

"I would not complain," he added, "for fate has been kind to me, but I see no reason why I should endure this loneliness. Other men marry; why should not I? This is the problem which I have been engaged upon for some time. Difficult as it seemed, at first, I have the answer, now. Miss Olive it is not good for man to be alone. I am alone, now. Will you come to me as a life-companion—as a wife?"

Olive was amazed. It was not unusual to hear the Samaritan wander on in such speech, and the preamble had given no clew of what was coming. Never before had it occurred to her that he was a marrying man. Indeed, it seemed almost a sacrilege for one so devoted to goodness as he to think of marrying any one, while that he should wish to marry her—the idea was astounding!

As she remained silent, he gently added:

"Perhaps I take you unawares?"

"You do, indeed," she managed to say.

"Yet, you must have read a measure of what has been in my mind?"

"I never suspected it!"

"No?"

"Never!"

"Still, I trust it will not be unwelcome?"

"Surely, doctor, you cannot have given this matter due thought. I feel I am not the person for such an honor—for the companion of your life."

Olive was not sure she was coherent, for she was utterly bewildered and amazed, but Spokane Saul seemed content. He smiled calmly.

"I am the best judge of that. I have thought seriously on this subject, and you see the result. Have no fear; the matter is wise. I will attend to all, and we will be married in a week or so."

Olive forgot he was a Samaritan, and her answer sprung quickly to her lips as it would had he been an ordinary man:

"You forget one thing, sir?"

"What is that?"

"To ask for my consent!"

He smiled slowly.

"I fancy there will be no trouble on that point."

"Doctor Littlefinger, do you know what you are saying?" demanded the girl, struggling between astonishment and indignation.

"Perhaps I fail to see some intricate point which occurs to you, Miss Olive. If this is so, pray enlighten me."

"It is customary when a man seeks a wife to learn whether the union will be agreeable to her before he sets the day for the wedding!"

It was Spokane's turn to look surprised.

"Does this mean you are opposed to the match?"

"That's just what it does mean!"

The Samaritan shifted his weight from one foot to the other several times before he found an answer. When he did speak there was no trace of ill-feeling in his voice.

"Perhaps I was hasty," he agreed, meekly; "and I believe you are right in saying I forgot a preliminary. I should have asked your consent. Miss Olive, will you marry me?"

She grew cautious.

"I thank you for the honor, but I do not think we were intended for one another. There are many who would do greater honor to your home, doctor. Take one of them, and do not give me a further thought. It is best so; best for both of us. One of your elevated plane of thought needs a wiser wife, while as for me, I have no intention of marrying at present. I again thank you for the honor—but I must decline."

Olive might have softened the refusal more than she did, but not yet had she overcome her anger at what she regarded as his assurance in trying to marry her off-hand.

"Perhaps you would like time to think of this?" he suggested.

"No!"

"And you decline to marry me?"

"I must. I—"

"I perceive I am not to your taste," he remarked, placidly. "This pains me, yet, it is not wholly a surprise. I have some clew to the kind of a man you would seek for a life's companion."

"You have?"

"Yes. I have not been so blind as some others, Miss Olive. I happen to know where you went in the early morning, after the affair at the Punch-Bowl!"

Olive changed color.

"Where did I go?"

"Up there!"

With a slow motion the Samaritan pointed toward the upper half of the camp. His finger indicated Gurdon Forrest's hut!

CHAPTER XI.

OLIVE IS DISMAYED.

OLIVE was unable to command her expression. She showed several different colors in succession, none of which was a natural color. The Samaritan evinced no emotion, but such a remark from any one was to be taken as a signal of danger.

"You—you talk at random!" she faintly faltered.

"Hardly! You went in broad daylight; it required no unusual skill to see you. Mr. Forrest was honored by your call."

"I did not see the man as you allege."

"True, for he was not at home. But you went, nevertheless. Do not deny this and lose the high opinion I have entertained for your veracity, Miss Olive."

"I fail to see what this has to do with the matter we had under discussion."

"I think," remarked Spokane Saul, with his slowest utterance, "if I were to go to Thomas Hammond he would see more clearly. There are none so blind as those who will not see, you know. Really, Miss Olive, I am sorry you should feel drawn to that man. He is of low nature and violent temper, to say the least. You ought not to put thy love with such a man."

"Who says I have?" Olive demanded, defiantly.

"We need not quibble. Of course I know all. Now, do you not believe it would be wiser to drop this violent youth and cleave to one who, be he never so humble, is an honest man?"

"Doctor Littlefinger, you indulge in too much guessing. If I understand you aright, you insinuate that I am in love with Mr. Forrest. It is unjust for you to link my name with that of any man, for I am not the affianced of any one, nor have I desire to be. I am—"

"Disingenuous and transparent! Let me finish for you. Now, I am not blind, Miss Olive; I know more of the secret happenings of this camp than you might suppose. I am aware that you made haste to go and see Forrest after the machinery of law bade fair to get him in its clutches. Why did you try to warn him, if you care naught for him?"

"Warn him?" faltered Olive.

"That we might have secured the clew!"

If there had been any ambiguity before, it existed no longer. The speech was right to the point. If the Samaritan had said in so many words that he knew Gurdon to be the "road-

agent" of the Punch-Bowl, it would not have been more pointed and clear; and it was an unpleasant fact that he did not seek to detect any sign upon her face.

He appeared too sure of his position to need to entrap a foolish girl in what her guilty face might tell.

"If Forrest has received your warning, he has been reckless. He is still in Sahara—and I am the chairman of the committee to hunt the robbers down!"

"What has this to do with Gurdon?"

"Much, if the lynching spirit knew he was the robber."

Olive could not find words to reply.

"I have only to say to the men sworn to follow me. 'Behold the robber and assassin!' What would be the result?"

She gazed at the calm, gentle-voiced speaker in mute dismay.

"Do you intend to do this?"

"I am chairman of the committee."

"It would be an unjust act to direct suspicion against a man who may be suspected, but who, I am sure, is as innocent as you or I."

"Perhaps he can be saved."

"How?"

"By you!"

"What can I do?"

"Marry me!" returned the Samaritan, calmly. "I am not a hard man to deal with; my record speaks for me. Now, you say you do not care for this Gurdon Forrest. This indicates a merely benevolent interest; a most praiseworthy quality, I do assure you! You can save Forrest. Marry me, and the crime of the Punch-Bowl shall never be solved!"

If the end of the world had suddenly come, if the streams of the hills had suddenly dried up, if the mountain-peaks had visibly made obeisance to the valleys, Olive would not have been more astonished.

Was this the Samaritan of Sahara who spoke? Was this the man who was deemed above guile, whose praises were sung by grateful men and women?—the man who was regarded as a little more than perfect, if such a thing could be? And he was trying to win an unwilling wife by making a bargain which would be a disgrace to himself and a crime for them both!

It was amazing.

He waited patiently for his answer. This was long in coming, but, at last, Olive's face flushed, and she indignantly exclaimed:

"You should be ashamed to make the proposal, sir!"

"I think you over-estimate the case," Saul sluggishly returned, "but do not forget what it means to Gurdon Forrest."

"And that is?"

"Life or death!"

"Would you destroy him just because I refused to make a victim of myself?"

"In that case, I should have to do my duty, but if it was a matter of interest to you, I could not refuse your request—if you were my promised wife."

The truly good see things in a different light from ordinary people. The Samaritan's calm face showed that he perceived nothing wrong in the project, but Olive was simply horrified. More than that, she was too much amazed to realize that she had heard aright. She could not yet believe she had listened to such a proposal from Spokane Saul, the immaculate.

"Well?" he mildly questioned, as she failed to answer.

"I will not do it! never, never!"

"Think again!"

"It is not necessary."

"Yet, it is best. I will give you a few days for consideration. Remember what it means to Forrest. If he is announced as the robber of the Punch-Bowl, he will never be tried. The people are so indignant they would take him to the nearest tree and hang him as high as Haman!"

"And you would allow this?"

"Duty would oblige me to tell the story of his guilt. Beyond that, I should have nothing to do with the case. Now Miss Olive, I will not keep you longer. You may have important business on hand. Let me not delay you to the injury of the errand I beg of you. I will see you again at no distant day. In the mean while think of my words to you, and think of Gurdon. The poor fellow would be in sad plight if the lynchers got their red hands on him. Good-day, Miss Olive!"

With his blandest smile the Samaritan went down the street. On the way he was accosted by two poor persons who asked for medical advice and treatment. It was given—free, as usual—and given with such words of kindness that the grateful sufferers were moved to go to their neighbors and tell of the good doctor's latest deeds of Samaritanism. But it was no new story.

Every one knew of his goodness.

Every one except Olive.

She was a skeptic. Perverse girl!

Whatever she had been out for was forgotten. Her mind was in a whirl, and she wanted to be out of sight of all. She wanted to think of the late interview; to try to understand what had taken place, anyhow.

Time was needed to dispel her confusion.

When she reached home she found a visitor with Mrs. Pearl Hammond. The former was talking earnestly, and on a subject dear to the hearts of the Saharaites.

"The robber will be caught!" she declared.

"When Spokane Saul takes charge of any matter, it is sure to end well. How good of him to be chairman of the committee! He will give his time, and, as usual, give it for nothing. Yes, he will catch the robber, for Doctor Littlefinger is under the protection of the heavenly spirits!"

"Of Satan, you mean!" snapped Mrs. Pearl.

"What?" gasped the visitor.

"I am tired of this gush over Saul Littlefinger!"

"Gush?"

"That's what I said. The thing is ridiculous. If he was the Angel Gabriel the people here would not sing his praises half so loud, while as for this alleged Samaritan, he is a humbug! Samaritan, indeed! He deserves the name as much as Mephistopheles does. He's a humbug and a hypocrite!"

Mrs. Pearl had waxed warm under the heat of her own argument, and seemed capable of going on indefinitely, but she suddenly checked herself. It took the visitor some time to get her breath.

"Surely, you don't mean what you say?" she finally managed to reply.

"I am not in the habit of talking vainly."

"And you say this about Spokane Saul?"

"You heard me, didn't you?" sulkily inquired Mrs. Pearl.

"I am astounded!"

"His dupes are all in some kind of a trance."

"But it's only a very few days since I heard you sing his praises as loud as any one."

"I know him better, now."

"What do you know against him?"

"I must decline to tell. I suppose I was rash to say what I did. I trust you won't repeat it."

"I will not, for you certainly were out of your head when you said it. No one in her right mind would, or could, say aught against Saul Littlefinger!"

"Have it as you will," replied Mrs. Pearl, "but let me make one prediction: He will not find the road-agents of the Punch-Bowl!"

"Why do you think that?"

"My reasons need not be given. Further than that I have nothing to say. Let us drop the subject."

The visitor was not willing, but the hostess was determined, and she carried the point. Spokane Saul was banished from the conversation.

When satisfied she would hear no more, Olive went her way, but she had heard enough to interest her anew.

Why had Mrs. Pearl so suddenly deserted from the ranks of those who worshiped Saul? Why had it come directly after the sudden abandonment of her intention to expose Gurdon Forrest at the public meeting? Was there any connection between the two? Olive was not in a mood to reason logically, but, rather, in a frame of mind to catch at straws. From this arose the self-inquiry:

"Has the Samaritan got my aunt by the throat, too?"

There was no good reason for so thinking, and Olive soon abandoned thought on the subject.

She had more important matters to occupy her time. Once in her room she sat down and tried to think calmly—a task by no means easy. Not yet had she recovered from the shock of seeing Saul Littlefinger fall from the proud height he had filled in her esteem.

"The man is a hypocrite and a villain!" she cried, aloud. "His proposal would put a barbarian to the blush. And he is the idol of Sahara! Am I awake or dreaming? Dreaming? No, no! I am fatally awake; and I see Gurdon Forrest in deadly danger! What can I do for him?—what can I do?"

CHAPTER XII.

DOOM PRONOUNCED.

CASUAL mention has been made of one Andrew Damon among the inhabitants of Sahara. He was practically a saloon-keeper, there. He could not be called a hotel-keeper, for a hotel was one of the things barred out of the camp.

When Sahara was started, the rulers determined to make it strictly private as a home for the chosen people. With this idea in mind it was also determined to keep out all who had no permanent business there. The managers acquired all the land near at hand, and set their faces against visitors of all kinds.

No hotel was allowed, and if an outsider drifted in, he had no place to sleep, for no house could open its doors to him. In place of a hotel was Damon's resort, which he called "The Rest," but which was merely a boarding-house for the unmarried miners. No outsider was ever sheltered, and but scant hospitality was shown those who ventured to pause there on their way through the town.

At Damon's, that night, the miners congregated more numerous than usual to talk over the events of the last few hours.

Among the number were Gurdon Forrest, Big Benoni, Hinch Trim and Daniel Wayland.

Puyallup Peter, Gurdon's friend, was there in his capacity as man-of-all-work for Damon.

Wayland was not a frequent visitor there, and Gurdon was shrewd enough to suspect he had come as a spy—to listen and see what he could hear. He heard enough, such as it was, for the talk was all of the event at the Punch-Bowl.

Opinions were freely given by most of those present, but as all talked in one vein, their remarks and oracular sayings need not be given here.

It was while they were thus occupied that one came into the circle who was not a member of the Sahara Colony. The coming was noiseless, and they had no suspicion of the fact that any one was at hand until a voice broke in on their own conversation with the observation:

"Gentlemen, I am here to do you good!"

It was an unusual remark, and all looked up in wonder. They saw a woman, old, bony, ugly and erratic of appearance.

"I am the one person who has an element of originality about me, and there are others who are like me," was the mysterious and contradictory addition.

"I doubt it!" retorted Hinch Trim, "unless there are witches still on deck!"

"Beware that you don't tempt the wrath of the witch!" she retorted, quickly and menacingly.

"Meanin' you, old woman?"

"Meaning myself."

"Wal, ef you pride yerself as a wrestler, I don't mind tryin' you a back, ter see who is the best man!"

Hinch grinned broadly at his supposed wit, but the retort brought few smiles other than his own.

"Your end it is easy to prophecy; the hangman has only to foreclose on your worthless carcass."

With this observation she turned away from him abruptly and faced the crowd in general.

"Gentlemen, what one of you is interested in oneiromancy?" she inquired.

Nobody answered at first, but Puyallup Peter finally broke the silence with the frank confession:

"I may be, but I don't know it by that name, b'durn! What kind of a animal is it, anyhow?"

"Oneiromancy is the science of telling fortunes by means of dreams, and it is the only sure way of getting at the decrees of fate before events actually transpire."

"You're the high priestess, I s'pose?"

"I am a follower of the art, I am proud to say. Now, whoever would have the future unfolded by a reliable person may improve the chance. Behold in me Brown Bet, the Dream-Oracle! Who will have his dream made plain?"

"Me, b'durn!" declared Puyallup. "I'm always willin' ter give a lame dog a lift over the fence. Let 'er go, Betsey!"

Those who knew Peter well might have suspected he was not so sincere as he seemed, but the Dream-Oracle did not seem troubled by the possibility of a scoffer being at hand. He told his dream, and certainly received his money's worth in return. Had he been superstitious he might have been worried by the fact that the prediction was a lugubrious and ominous one, but this did not upset his composure.

After him came others. Most of the miners were of a frank and simple nature, and inclined to look upon the matter as one quite serious, and they faced Brown Bet with gravity. They turned away with the mood heightened by the fact that each prediction was gloomy, and one would have thought Sahara had struck a veritable vein of misfortune.

All this while the Americans remained skeptical. They did not believe in the woman; they did not place any faith in oneiromancy, or any other species of fortune-telling.

Finally the frightened face of a Swede who had been given an especially melancholy future caused Gurdon Forrest to smile, and the dream-woman turned just in time to catch the expression on his face. Her regard became centered upon him.

"Here is a scoffer!" she exclaimed.

"That does not affect any truth," returned Gurdon, smiling.

"No; but the scoffers should be convinced. Dare you test your fate, flippant sir?"

"I fear no fate you can call down upon me."

"Yet, I'll wager something you dare not try me!" the Dream-Oracle exclaimed.

"Done! You shall have the chance. I tell you fairly, I don't believe in you or your art: it is not given to man to know what fate has in store for him. If you want to make a failure, go on!"

Up to this time the woman had not seemed strikingly impressive. She had been wonderfully grave and owl-like when listening to the dream upon which forecasts were to be founded, but she had seemed like the bony old person she was, and, to the intelligent mind, no more.

But the challenge had aroused the belligerent spirit within her, and her eyes began to glitter. She drew up her spare form; she grew really impressive, in a certain way. She even made some of those present feel queer sensations creeping along their spinal columns.

"We shall see; we shall see!" she exclaimed, not in friendly mood. "The dream, young man; the dream!"

"You shall be accommodated. I had a dream, a few nights ago, which was out of the ordinary run. I thought I stood in the central street of Sahara and saw an eagle sailing over the camp. As I looked he was joined by a second, and then a third, and after them came many more, until the sky was obscured by the immense host which winged its way above the place.

"Finally, a clear circle was made in the middle of the flock, after which four eagles of gigantic size came to the circle bearing in their talons a rock of great size. Holding this, they hovered directly over me for a moment; then they let the rock drop.

"I watched it fall. For awhile I had only idle curiosity, but the fact finally dawned upon me that I was exactly in the path of the descending rock.

"Then I tried to move: to get out of its reach. In vain! I was chained to the spot!

"The rock hit me; it crushed me to the earth, to nothingness. Then I awoke. I had had a nightmare!"

Gurdon smiled lazily as he concluded, but it was not so with the Dream-Oracle. Her eyes gleamed more brightly than ever.

"A nightmare!" she echoed. "No, no; not so! It was the voice of fate speaking in its language to man! Would you know what that dream meant? Listen!

"That you dreamed of eagles over the camp was a sign that some one was conspiring to ruin the camp. The eagles had gathered to save it. As for the rock which descended to crush you, it was a sign that in the battle between the eagles and the plotter you would be crushed in reality; that you would be ground to atoms in the fight!

"Young man, beware! Fate has spoken to you; it has told you of approaching doom. Beware of the eagles! Save yourself while you can, or you are doomed. Ay, and I think you are doomed, anyhow. The rock did crush you. Is not that plain? You are to die in the fight between the plotter and the eagles!"

Brown Bet ceased to speak.

Gurdon Forrest found every eye fixed upon him. He was not superstitious, but he wished he never had told that dream. Chance or fate—who should say which?—had made the prediction too near to the things he had at heart for it to be welcome.

For Brown Bet and her power of divination he cared nothing, but there were those there who might not put a sensible interpretation on the untimely speech.

And among the eyes which studied his face were those of Daniel Wayland.

"Durn my socks!" exclaimed Hinch Trim, "ef that don't point ter the affair at the Punch-Bowl, what is it?"

"I'm glad I did not dream it!" muttered a superstitious miner.

"Why should you dream it, Gurd?" inquired Hinch, slowly.

"Ask the dream-woman," suggested Gurdon, trying to appear at ease wholly.

"Wait for time to tell!" she retorted. "Wait, and when you are in the toils, see if you scoff at the wandering woman."

"But why should you be crushed?" persisted Hinch, looking at Forrest.

"Ask the eagles, later on," advised Brown Bet.

"You ain't the robber of the Punch-Bowl, be you, Gurd?" inquired Trim, whose mind could not get out of the old channel.

"Unfortunately, I haven't a dollar to prove it!"

Gurdon laughed as he spoke, but the laugh was forced. Absurd as the matter was, he could see that the miners were looking at him with actual suspicion. The storm might pass, but there was a dangerous current against him then.

Wayland said nothing. Would he be practical and forget the prediction in a few moments, or would it remain in his mind? He was too intelligent to be superstitious, but trifles often bear important fruit, and Gurdon had not been cautious about speaking his mind in the past.

A known rebel against the fate of the miners, what damage might not the old woman have done?

"Dreams go by contraries," remarked Puyallup Peter, moving uneasily in his chair. "I dreamt once, that I had married a beautiful damsel with a mint o' money. I woke hilarious, but the next day I was sued for breach o' promise by an ol' maid with only one tooth, an' so many wrinkles you could 'a' used her hide fer corrugated paper ter pack whisky bottles in!"

This sadly lightened the gloom a trifle, but when the Dream-Oracle called for fresh patrons, she got none. They had seen enough of her and her way.

When this became clear to Brown Bet, she abruptly turned to Damon.

"Give me a room and accommodations!" she ordered.

"S'rry, but we can't do it."

"Why not? Isn't my money as good as any other man's?"

"That's all right, ma'am, but we give shelter to no one, here. We keep no hotel, and do not allow private persons to put any one up for love or money. This is a private town; outsiders have to keep out. See?"

"I see you are a beggarly lot!" cried the woman, intemperately. "So I can have no shelter? No wonder the eagles are going to ruin all things here."

"I thought they were the rescuers, not the ruiners."

"The gods know whom to destroy. Don't you think you own the whole world, old man. You don't, and never will while I have a word to say about it. A murrain on you and your old camp! May the dogs eat your bones! Yes; and they'll do it, too!"

"Come, come! don't you get cranky, or you'll get fired out at once."

"I'd like to see you try it!"

The dream-woman had degenerated into a virago, and she swung her arms and shook her bony fists at Damon in a very hostile way. He was not disposed to eject her roughly, so he endured from her what he would not from a man.

He patiently explained the system at Sahara, and when she knew the facts she had less to say.

"All right, all right!" she returned, "I'll go my way, but you ain't seen the last of me. I'm going to stay and see the eagles work!"

Laughing unpleasantly, she turned and stalked from the room.

The next morning one of the miners had occasion to go past the now-famous spot called the Punch-Bowl. He looked warily to see if any road-agent was near. He saw none, but there was one thing new and of interest.

In the circle which formed the Bunch-Bowl a small tent had been put up, and as he drew near in wondering investigation, a person appeared at the entrance. Looking at him calmly, this person inquired:

"Will you have your fortune told by oneiromancy?"

It was the dream-woman!

She had found a place of rest.

Singular choice! Was it all chance?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BANSHEE.

ANDREW DAMON had an Irish wife. When she had heard of the fact that Brown Bet had prophesied for many, and prophesied a greater or less degree of calamity for all, she gave the Dream-Oracle the sobriquet of the "Banshee." The name was not inappropriate, for, surely, Brown Bet was a harbinger of ill, and if she did not chant songs of impending calamity, she sounded doom to them in her peculiar way.

So the miners began to call her the Banshee, and there were some who did not feel at ease when it was known she had gone into camp so near them; but the suggestion that she be made to move on did not meet with prompt response.

Nobody cared to lead the attack.

That afternoon the woman was seen again in the town. She entered quietly, and, speaking to no one, walked straight on until she reached Thomas Hammond's house. Those who had watched her accounted for this fact by remembering it was the largest building in camp.

It was her lot to find Mrs. Hammond on the piazza. The latter lady had developed a thoughtful frame of mind since the public meeting, and was much given to solitary meditation. If her exalted position as the wife of the illustrious Thomas had not made her exempt from criticism, one might well have thought she had something of an unpleasant nature on her mind.

Her position did not enable her to see the wandering woman until the latter was close at hand.

Olive, sitting at a window near at hand, had seen the Banshee some time before. Not having heard of her, the girl was curious to know what manner of person had come to Sahara. When she turned toward the house, Olive perceived there was to be a call of some kind; perhaps that of a beggar.

She watched, and saw all that followed except the expression on Mrs. Pearl's face. This she was not so situated that she could observe. If she had been, it would have been of interest.

Almost at the last moment the lady of the house saw the ill-looking rover. She started as she saw her, too. Why? The Banshee was not repulsive, if she was bony and homely. Then why did Mrs. Pearl start and suddenly grow pale?

Close to her came the wanderer.

"I give you good greeting, and the wish of many years," spoke Bet, in a whining voice unlike her usual prompt utterance.

But Mrs. Pearl said nothing. Olive wondered why. Her step-aunt was not cowardly, and she had no sympathy for any one who was poor, be that person dressed in good clothes or bad.

"If you would know of the future, I can unfold it to you, gentle lady. Unto me is it given to unravel the things which are hid from all else. Wouldst know the future?"

"What are you doing here?" suddenly, sharply demanded the rich man's wife.

"Beg pardon, madam?"

"You—you—why are you here?"

It dawned upon Olive that the coming of the old woman was more than an ordinary event. Mrs. Pearl was startled; she was frightened. That was evident in every way. Why this should be so the listener had no means of knowing. Her acquaintance with her step-aunt did not extend back many years. She, for one, had never seen the Banshee before.

"Madam," replied Bet, unmoved, "I hardly know how to meet your question. Why am I here? Know that my feet tread the soil of every State of the Union. I am a wanderer. I go East—"

"Be still! Why do you mock at me? Why, why did you break your solemn pledge?"

If Olive had been surprised by the beginning of the conversation, she was amazed, now. Instead of growing calm, Mrs. Pearl became more agitated. Her voice shook in a way not to be accounted for in any visible way. More than that, it was imploring; it was almost anguished.

What would come next, when the haughty lady lowered herself to a mere tramp, or one who looked like one?

"Madam," the Banshee returned, "don't flatter yourself you can govern my actions by so much as the diameter of a hair. What care I for promises? I go and come where and when I please. Know that! But I am come as a friend, now."

"You a friend?"

"So I say, and I have come to help, to warn you. You know I have gifts above the common run of the human race. Well, listen to me, now: An hour of tribulation is at hand for you; foes will come, and you will be in sore danger."

"What do you intend?"

"I?"

"You, for I know you are in the plot, if there is one!"

"Wild talk, as usual. You are too prone to go by your judgment, and but few are wise except in their own conceit. Wait and see; wait and see! I tell you the future has things of rare interest, but look you out. Beware, beware!"

Mrs. Pearl did not answer. It was clear she did not believe it any friendly warning, and that she did expect some blow from the Banshee. Olive was astonished. What power could the woman have over the haughty lady?

"You don't speak," added Bet.

"Because I have nothing to say to you. I had your promise that I should be forever free from you, and yet you have broken it willfully. Can you expect me to believe in you?"

"Perverse, as usual! You almost tempt me to strike at you, myself, but I will force you to admit you are in the wrong. Do I ask aught of you? Is there one scrap of evidence that I wish to profit by what I could tell of you, if I would? No; while I do not care for more promises, I have nothing to ask of you. I am better able to give than are you. Wait and see!"

"What does all this mean?"

"Wait and see! I am merely come to tell you to look well to yourself. Neglect it, and you are gone!"

The Banshee turned away. Mrs. Pearl regarded her doubtfully, expecting more, but in this she was disappointed. Brown Bet stalked off down the street, and not once looking behind her, was soon well away. In watching her, Mrs. Pearl had failed to see that another person was at hand, and her first notification came when footsteps sounded almost beside her. She looked up quickly and saw Spokane Saul.

His chubby face was calm, but he gazed after the Banshee with more than usual interest, it seemed.

"You have had a visitor," he remarked, mildly.

Pearl did not answer. She was regarding Saul in a way which indicated that his presence was no relief from that of the Dream-Oracle.

"This woman is not of our town," added the Samaritan, slowly.

"No."

"Is she a friend of yours?"

"O' mine? Certainly not!"

Saul stood in silence. Somehow, the wandering woman seemed to exercise an influence over him which was not pleasant, though his manner did not show the vexation which a less perfect man might have betrayed if vexed.

"You appear to be wrought up over her!" added Mrs. Pearl, viciously.

"I?" answered the Samaritan, turning his regard upon the lady with mild surprise. "I assure you I did not even see her face clearly."

"She is not handsome, doctor; but to such a truly good man, beauty should count for nothing."

Spokane smiled placidly.

"I fear there is much of sarcasm in your remark, good Mrs. Hammond, yet you enunciate a truth with force and wisdom. Of a verity, beauty counts for naught with those who are of correct minds. 'Tis a thing which vanishes as the dew of the morning. I pity the woman who is of facial beauty. The charm soon goes, and then comes the pang of a deep grief. She who has not will miss not, while she who has shall

have not, and when her possessions are gone she will lament with much of sharp regret."

Having proclaimed this rather obscure doctrine, the Samaritan became more practical in his manner.

"Good lady, can you give shelter, here, to a stranger for a time?"

"I? This is no hotel!"

"Of that fact I am well aware, but 'tis the deed of a free heart to shelter the homeless."

"Some friend of yours, I suppose?"

"Not so; a mere stranger. Yet she is a young person, without due friends and guardians, she tells me; and your roof would be a haven of rest to her."

"What new plot have you in mind?" sharply demanded Mrs. Pearl.

"Hush! hush!" remonstrated the Samaritan, looking around as if to make sure no one overheard his companion's deplorable exhibition of temper. "I cannot feel at ease while you do yourself such an injustice. Be calm, I implore you. Now, the person is a young woman who is not over-gifted with the intelligence which is the birthright of most persons. She needs the care of friends, and it is simply for that reason I am anxious to do what I can for her."

"Spare yourself the trouble of further explanation, sir. Thomas Hammond would not under any condition agree to this plan. He utterly refuses to have even our own friends here as guests."

"This case is different. I have his permission."

Mrs. Pearl looked astonished.

"You have?"

"Yes."

"How in the world did you get it?"

"Mr. Hammond is a very benevolent man."

"Benevolent fiddlesticks!" retorted Hammond's wife. "He would not show benevolence to his own flesh and blood unless he was to be a gainer thereby—unless," she slowly added, "he was forced to do it!"

The idea seemed to impress Mrs. Pearl, and she leaned forward and intensely demanded:

"Have you got him by the throat, too?"

"Hush! hush!" the Samaritan again remonstrated. "Why will you use such intemperate language? Either you are very flighty, or you are an injudicious jester. If one should overhear you, it really might be thought you meant it."

"What a devil you are!"

Mrs. Pearl spoke almost in admiration. She was not one who sought for fine or refined words with which to express her meaning, and the bluntness was characteristic of her. But Spokane Saul looked shocked.

"Dear lady, do not be so precipitate. Do not bear false witness, either. Surely, you would not hurt my feelings, or stir my blood to undue strife?"

There was almost a menace in the reply, Olive thought, but she may have been in error. The good are often misjudged. Mrs. Pearl was very frank, however.

"Don't be a hypocrite," she requested. "I am beginning to admire you for your sins. Don't shake my faith. You have me by the throat. Well, why not let me enjoy it as much as possible?"

The Samaritan sighed deeply.

"You are not in your normal mood, to-day, or there would not be such ideas in your mind. I do not think I will linger longer. As to the young person, she can come here."

"You say Mr. Hammond has given his consent. If he has, I have no more to say. What can I say? You have me by the throat!"

Spokane Saul signed deeply again. It was clear that the rude expression jarred on his sensitive nerves.

"I will see you again," he stated, and walked slowly down the street. And as he went, those who met him paused for a moment to pay respectful tribute to his rare qualities of honor.

Hardly was he out of sight when Thomas Hammond returned to the house. His wife was ready to bear of a coming guest, but he passed her without a word of recognition and went to his own room with heavy steps.

This was an unusual proceeding, but more was to come. After a few moments a servant came to Mrs. Pearl with the message:

"Mr. Hammond is ill, and will not be down to dinner. He also bids me say that he expects a guest, to-night, of whom he will tell more when his headache has abated."

It was not much, but it told a good deal to Mrs. Pearl.

"The guest is as unwelcome to Thomas as to myself. We bid fair to have some sport here!"

With this comment she went into the house.

All this Olive had overheard, her position screening her from view. When the last of the group was gone, she gave herself up to amazement. Had she really heard aright? It seemed almost impossible—it was asking much of human nature to expect any one to believe ill of the Samaritan of Sahara. Olive had almost been inclined to believe her own interview with him was a dream.

Even if all these things had occurred, was there not some misunderstanding? Saul had been accused of plots and meanness. He had

borne all this meekly. His temper had not been aroused by the severest comment. Had he been misunderstood?

But only for the moment did Olive waver.

"The man is a hypocrite!" she exclaimed. "He is the enemy of all here, in order that he may further his own selfish ends!"

The common people of Sahara could not have been convinced of this fact. She knew that perfectly well. With them the Samaritan was perfect. So are all idols until they fall. Olive believed she saw clearly, at last.

"What a wretch! what a wretch!" she murmured.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FIGHT FOR THE TREASURE.

SURFACE mining was the prevailing feature of the work of Sahara. Everything was made use of, but the nature of the place enabled the gold-seekers to work with less labor than the generally rocky nature of the region would seem to show as necessary. The river which washed the base of the hills was in a great measure recruited right among the valleys and gulches of the camp, and the sands thereof were rich, if the truth were but known, with the auriferous dust.

This did away with cumbersome mining, and enabled the diggers to carry on the plan at first laid out by Hammond, which was to house the golden harvest as soon as obtained.

This was done in a structure at the edge of the town.

Each night the yield of the day, as far as possible, was put into the building—and that was the last seen of it until the leaders made their report of the gains, except by those who watched over, and, at last, carried it away.

Hinch Trim always slept in the structure, while the guards were two Swedes, but the latter were on duty but five nights in the week. On other nights the watch was divided as Hinch saw fit. The actual result of all this was that the plotters had abundant chance to get gold out of the camp secretly whenever they wished, and this the unquestioning faith of the miners had rendered still more easy.

On the night of the day last referred to Hinch arranged his men to suit himself, again. There was no intention of fresh pilloining, for the rulers had received a lesson which taught them caution, but Hinch was of the opinion that whoever had done the work at the Punch-Bowl would make further effort as soon as they dared. Hence, on all possible occasions, he intended to be on the alert for the robbers. This night he had dispensed with the guards, and he and Wayland were keeping watch alone.

Until after midnight there was but little to reward their vigilance. All was quiet up and down the lonely vicinity. The wind made a gentle murmur along the base of the hills; that was the whole story. No more was heard or seen.

Wayland lay down, but Hinch went out and stood in the shadow of the building. He had a wide sweep of vision. He saw the sleeping town, and saw the mountains towering above. He was not a romantic man, but the scene pleased him. He sat down, and unconsciously fell into a doze.

When he awoke it was with the impression that he had been disturbed by something out of the ordinary run. Without rising, he looked around carefully. No one was to be seen.

Suddenly he grew more alert. There was a sound at the rear of the building. What was it? It appeared that a board had creaked, and not in a natural way.

He sprang up; he quickly rounded the corner. As he did so he saw he had come none too soon. The place was no longer lonely. Other men were there, and they were not in company with Wayland.

"What's going on, here?" he demanded, sharply.

He had not been seen before. They wheeled and confronted him. If he had felt any doubts as to their purpose, he felt it no longer. They were masked, not in the absurd style of the stage, but so thoroughly that even their heads were covered. Such men could have no honest errand there.

"Surrender!" he added, drawing a revolver. "Surrender, or I'll bore you full of holes!"

The reply came quickly, but not as he wanted it. One of the pair leaped at him like a tiger, and though he made a corresponding effort to get out of the way, he was nearly thrown to the ground. At the same time he made an effort to keep his threat, and did fire the revolver, but only succeeded in "boring a hole" through the atmosphere, instead of the man he aimed at. The report had hardly died away before the other man leaped at him, and he found more than he could do to keep his end up. To him it seemed as if the woods were full of foes.

He was flung to the ground, and one of the pair seized him by the throat. The tables were turned.

"Surrender, yourself!" grated a passionate voice. "We are not here for child's play. Surrender, or take the consequences!"

A revolver was flourished in front of his eyes; the muzzle was turned upon him.

"Help!" he screeched, stricken with craven fear. "This way, Wayland! Help!"

Fortunately for him, help was at hand. Wayland came rushing out of the building.

"Shoot!" implored Hinch. "Quick, or I am a dead man!"

The secretary did his best. He pressed the trigger, and the bullet went on its way. Unluckily, in their opinion, it cut only air.

At this point one of the strangers was heard to speak to his companion, and the result was at once apparent. Both ran away at full speed.

"Fire! fire!" shouted Hinch.

Wayland was willing, and once more he pressed the trigger. For a man of the West his aim was poor. He hit nothing, and the attempt would have been a total failure had it not been for circumstances unknown to any of the quartette. Still another man was seen approaching, and just in the path of the runaways.

"Up the slope!" ordered the leader of the supposed robbers. "We don't want to hurt any one."

It was a merciful plan, but it cut out some sharp work for the fugitives. They started up the ascent, but were not long in regretting the step. Their enemies followed sharply, and they did some rapid climbing until a startling fact dawned upon them. They had run into a trap.

"Say, Gurd!" exclaimed the stouter of the twain, "we can't go no further. I, fer one, can't climb air!"

Up the face of the rocks, almost cliff-like in their form, their way had been; but the speaker saw no way beyond.

"B'durn! we're in a pocket!" he added.

His companion did not reply. He looked anxiously for some crevice along which they might go. He saw none. His friend had spoken only too truly.

"This comes of being merciful with knaves!" Gurd exclaimed, bitterly. "We should have hardened our hearts and let them take the consequences. And they only villains!"

It was not a pleasant reflection, but it was too late to undo the mischief then.

"We couldn't go no higher ef we was goats," grumbled the stout man who, of course, was Puyallup Peter. "We've got ter take our medicine!"

By this time the enemy had ranged themselves along the base of the cliff.

"Surrender!" ordered Wayland.

Their revolvers enforced the demand.

"Come down out of that!" the secretary added. "We have you covered, and can drop you like birds. If you resist you are dead men!"

"Tell us something new," growled Puyallup.

The fact that the fugitives were cornered dawned upon the men below, and Hinch Trim laughed loudly.

"Hi! don't you wish ye hadn't? Why don't ye hold yer edge? Climb, my heroes; climb! This is what comes ter them who try funny biz. We hev got ye foul. Come ter our arms, my daisies!"

"How is it, Peter?" Gurdon asked.

"It's bad, b'durn!"

"I ask no one to share my desperate fortunes. If you think it best for you, go down and make a bid for mercy."

"Say, pard, et would be like a feller conclusion' fer ter come down after he had been swung up by the lynchers—a mighty well-planned scheme, but a trifle hard ter work at that late hour. But that ain't all. Gurd, I'm a tough old rooster, an' I'll be durned ef I go back on a friend in a fix. You an' me stand together in this while our socks hold on, an' I hev a notion you don't feel like surrender."

"Never!" Forrest agreed. "I can die here, if necessary, but I won't yield. It is too late for us to make our people believe we have been actuated by good motives in this. Either we may as well die and be done with it, or we must stick to and trust to some last chance to help us out."

"I'm with ye, ol' man! Count me in fer all the fun. Oh! I'm happier than a goat!"

The reckless speaker swung his hat as cheerfully as if things were going all their own way, but Gurdon indulged in no frivolity. He was in despair, not because there was danger, but because, if he fell there, he never would have a chance to convince the Saharaites that he had been actuated by noble motives in making the attack on the treasure.

In the mean while the enemy had consulted, and the result now became apparent. The third man was in sympathy with the other two, and they had a strong force.

"Are you going to surrender?" demanded Wayland.

"Let nothing tempt you into answering," cautioned Gurdon, quickly. "If they hear our voices, they may recognize us thereby. Let our motto be, live silent; if necessary, die silent!"

Wayland, tiring of the delay, added:

"Well, what have you to say?"

He waited for a reply, but received none.

"You may as well accept the inevitable. You can't escape, and the more trouble you

make us, the worse it will be for you. Come down, or we will turn our revolvers upon you and blow you into atoms!"

"Is that all?" muttered Puyallup. "Why, they ain't so tough on a poor feller, after all. Some folks would be mean when they had the upper hand, but they go light an' easy. Good boys, you!"

The silence of the imperiled persons evidently troubled Wayland. He devoted a good deal of time to talk, but when it became clear he was to get nothing out of them, his mind returned to the matter of shooting. Once more he gave warning; then he and his aids prepared to keep the threat.

They were two wise to go up the ascent after the fugitives, so they resorted to the bullets without any preliminary which put them in danger.

Hinch Trim claimed to be a shooter, and he led the way. He took aim and sent a shot on its way. It only clipped a piece off from the cliff, but made matters unpleasant for Gurdon and Peter.

Hinch tried again, but with no better success. "What's the trouble with you?" demanded Wayland, angrily.

"Durn! ef it's any snapper wing a man in this poor light," growled Hinch.

"Your eyes are failing you. I'll show you!"

The speaker fired. He had no means of knowing how near he came, for he did not drop the game, but the men on the cliff were unpleasantly aware his aim had not been bad. The bullet struck between them, and chips of rock flew over both.

"It's only a matter o' time!" quoth Puyallup, cheerfully. "They improve; they may branch out as shooters, yet."

The persons below realized that the best of marksmen had no sure thing, then, and all took a hand. Bullets flew thick and fast, and if none hit the target, the closeness of the thing was all the more proof that a chance shot would do mischief, sooner or later.

Gurdon was troubled. As time passed, he grew all the more reluctant to die so disgracefully. Time and again he had looked up the face of the cliff, hoping against hope that he would see some way out of the dilemma. The distance was but short; if they could but move on, a few efforts would take them out of the race.

He was not looking at all when, suddenly, something fell over his head and shoulders like a serpent. Then he again looked, this time hurriedly.

The thing was a rope!

Starting from the top of the cliff, it dangled down within his very grasp.

"B'durn!" muttered Peter, blankly.

Gurdon seized the rope. It was fast above.

"Ha! the way is open!" he exclaimed.

"Unless it's a trap fer us ter break our necks in a fall," warily suggested Puyallup.

"We can take no heed of such a possibility. It may be a snare, but we may as well die one way as another. I will test it!"

He grasped the rope and began the ascent. His faith was not great. Who would thus help them out of the predicament? They could think of no one. Surely, it might be a snare.

Gurdon was dangling from the rope. Peter watched with suspenseful anxiety he had rarely known in the past.

Was it to be life or death?

CHAPTER XV.

HUMAN TARGETS.

WAYLAND and his party saw what was going on, and were for the time dazed with consternation. Then the leader recovered enough to give a new order.

"Shoot them!" he yelled. "Now, all together! Pour in the lead! Drop them, anyhow!"

And the bullets began to patter faster than ever.

"Go it, ol' man!" called out Puyallup Peter, in high excitement. "This is our inning. Sprawl yer livelier!"

Gurdon needed no urging. He was now near the top, and with a final effort he drew himself up to the level above. He turned to Peter.

"Follow, follow!"

"I'm with ye, Gin'ral Jackson!"

Peter began his work. He was not so young as he was once, and it was no easy task, while the bullets which whistled around him did not aid to his mental happiness. But he was strong and plucky, and he neared the top.

Gurdon reached down and gave him a lift as soon as possible. He was safely landed.

"B'durn! that was a rouser!" he panted.

"Up and away! We have no time to lose. When the enemy have had time to think, it will occur to them that they have made a mistake in letting the chance go to run around the cliff. This they are bound to do at once. We must beat them out."

"Say, where's the feller who give us the rope?"

"I know not; no one is in sight. I would gladly stop to investigate, but we cannot. It might take our lives, and, certainly, we should be seen and recognized. Away!"

Now his life seemed saved, Gurdon's desire to

protect his identity became a passion. He actually dragged Puyallup to his feet. This aroused the veteran, who became as anxious as any one to evacuate the premises. Side by side they ran along the face of the cliff, just keeping themselves concealed from view.

At the first possible moment they branched off and proceeded to lose themselves, as it were, in the hills; but not until a full mile had been traveled did Gurdon allow a stop.

There they sat down to rest.

"I've had more fun than a goat!" declared Peter, with a sigh.

"Our identity was painfully near being discovered."

"Mebbe it was."

"True, but I think they would have made haste to announce the fact, if they had penetrated the secret. Remember, the light was poor."

"Right! Oh, I reckon we are still in it, ol' man."

"It must be our last risk. If we could have got into the treasure-building, we might have got proof of the fact that money is stored there which our people will never see, but it was not so to be. We were seen, and the enemy now know we are in full earnest. If we keep out of sight we must be content until we see a better chance to help our afflicted town."

Puyallup's mind had wandered.

"Say, b'durn! who dropped us that rope?" he demanded, abruptly.

Gurdon was silent. He had pondered upon the question once before, but not as earnestly as he now had time to do. Yet, think as he would, he could not arrive at any satisfactory decision.

"What do you say?" he finally asked.

"I ain't sayin' a word. I don't know a thing," Peter confessed. "Ef you have the key ter the biz you kin take the whole case an' the whole credit, b'durn!"

"Let us reason. First, who would be likely to help us, if he had the chance?"

"Nobody!"

"Truly stated. I, too, can think of no one. We have no ally; even Big Benoni, who is my true friend, has been kept in the dark in our case. Now, I can think of nobody who would be likely to chip in as the unknown did."

"Me, too; but there was just such a critter, an' it's lucky fer us he did, too. He was at the top o' the cliff; he chucked the rope down to us. Then he kited off on the jump. Et was a deliberate plan, sure. Luck never happened that way; not fer Hannab! He dropped the rope fer us! Why?"

Again Gurdon was silent. It was like hunting for the traditional needle in the hay-mow. Who could have helped them?—who would?

They discussed the matter further, but without gaining light. As had been said, they had no ally from whom such aid could be expected.

"An' why should anybody help us an' then skip?" added Puyallup. "Ef I had done it fer a feller, I'd 'a' stopped ter see how the biz come out. He didn't; he put on his boots an' sailed off like a comet fer the North Pole. Reckon he's got ter the end o' the world by now. I fancy I kin see him with his coat-tails standin' out straight ez my nose, bumpin' fer an iceberg!"

Puyallup was as full of light speeches as usual, but he was not so indifferent to the more serious aspects of the affair as might be believed. Even if they had escaped the bullets, the unknown had saved them from disgrace, perhaps from the lynchers, by interfering as he did. Surely, it was a timely work.

Failing to get clew to the matter, Gurdon turned his thoughts to the future.

"I suppose the town will ring with this fresh work, to-morrow," he remarked, gloomily. "Peter, this is hard to bear! I have but little hope of long deferring discovery. When it comes, where shall we be? Ruined!—ruined, and despised by all! No one ever will give us credit for the motives which have really actuated us in making the two attacks. Were the moment to be my last, I should still insist that my one consideration has always been for Sahara. For the good of our people I risked all that man holds dear—honor and future happiness. We took the risk and failed!"

"Cheer up! The race ain't run, yet."

"It may soon be, for us."

"I ain't so sure o' that. Never say die is a good motto. Try it! Don't think I am accusin' you o' cowardice, though; fer I know you're pluck ter the spine. But you mustn't worry so much about what the folks would think. B'durn! we may see the day when they're all with us. Yes; an' when Hammond an' the gang are in the dumps."

"We will hope for it, but you know what the chances are."

There was no more to do, and after due delay they returned to the camp. They used care in getting to their own quarters, and, as far as they could see, were successful in avoiding notice. Nor did they see any signs of other persons abroad.

The next morning they looked for the discussion of the fresh attack on the treasure, but the result surprised them. No one mentioned it

when they first appeared, and the hours wore on without any demonstration. Wayland and other leaders came and went, and met the miners in the usual manner, but not a whisper did the would-be robbers hear of their unsuccessful attempt.

Then it became clear there was to be no revelation. For some reason, silence was to be the order of the occasion. Either it was hoped the robbers would betray themselves, or those who had failed so completely to capture them were not inclined to confess their work.

The robbery certainly was not made common property.

The day passed as usual.

That evening Gurdon was abroad in the outskirts of the camp. He had decided to keep close to the main buildings, but business took him elsewhere for a time.

He was returning when he came face to face with a person he had not seen of late.

It was Olive Hammond.

Since the affair at the Punch Bowl he had carefully avoided her, doing it, he thought, in a skillful way, and, as is usual when folks try to be especially sbrewd in affairs of the heart, making a sorry mess of it.

This time he could not very well avoid the meeting without calling attention to himself by the eccentricity of the step, he having been eager enough to see her in the past. So he made a pretense of being pleased with the encounter.

"Miss Olive, this is an unexpected pleasure!" he declared.

"Is it?"

"Certainly; I did not once think of seeing you when I was walking along all alone."

"I referred to the alleged pleasure," she amended, somewhat coldly.

"Alleged! Do you doubt my sincerity?"

"I don't know what I believe, or don't believe, of late!"

"At least, you never knew me to show signs of trying to avoid you?"

"The past is not the present. I—I wish it was! I wish there was no present!"

"Miss Olive, you amaze me! Pray, what is the matter?"

The girl had spoken impulsively. His direct answer aroused her, and reminded her that she was betraying more interest in him than their degree of intimacy would warrant.

"Can't you see a joke?" and she tried to be light and careless. "Don't take me so seriously, Mr. Forrest. Are you out on business?"

"Nothing of moment."

"You have not been visible so much as usual, of late."

"No. I have been engaged in so many things that I have had no time for—that is, I have been busy!" he concluded, with some confusion, after getting mixed up in his explanation.

"Why don't you say, no time for insignificant people?"

"Because there was no such idea in my mind. Really, I don't know how to take you—"

"Don't take me at all!" she retorted. "But let us drop things that are vague. Nothing you may do can surprise me, now. I remember what your mood was the last time I had a chance to talk with you. That," she slowly added, "was the night the robbery took place at the Punch-Bowl!"

Gurdon was glad the darkness concealed his face.

"I did see you, then, I remember."

"Yes, you certainly did. That was the first time you gave evidence of mental derangement."

"Miss Olive, you are severe on me!" the miner exclaimed.

Olive could not have told why she had now met him in such a complaining mood. True, she had been piqued by his course in keeping out of her sight, but all the while her leading emotion had been one of intense fear that he would fall into the hands of the authorities. It was cruel to add one iota to his trouble, she now decided, even if he had failed to see her for some time.

If he had a guilty secret, she did not wish to know it.

"I beg your pardon," she replied, humbly. "I am in a peevish mood, I fear; an ill-tempered mood, if you will."

"Not at all," he hastened to say, with more loyalty than regard for veracity. "It was all my own fault."

"I think we are both simpletons. Let us drop the subject and reform. There is room for it."

CHAPTER XVI.

PATIENCE MAKES HER BOW.

OLIVE now managed to assume a vein of lightness, and the course was so happy as to put both more at their ease. For the time being they forgot the clouds of their lives, and old relations were established. Gurdon made an effort to do his part, and conversation became brisk on minor matters.

It was while they were thus occupied that Olive suddenly remembered a circumstance of the night at the Mutual Ball.

It was the blood-stain she had seen on his sleeve.

Recollection made her shiver and instinctively draw away from him. He could not avoid see-

ing this, but he did not see fit to comment upon it in any way.

Olive, however, could not let the subject rest. When in Gurdon's presence she found it impossible to believe he had been engaged in any wrong act. If given a chance, would he not clear himself?

She approached the matter carefully.

"We are living in troublous times, now," she observed.

"Yes," he agreed.

"Do you suppose the road-agent will be captured?"

"The chances are that he will."

"Why do you suppose any one should be mad enough to attack a man of Sahara for his money?"

"Why, indeed?" was the quick retort. "We are a camp of beggars!"

"Don't you think he was some stranger?"

"Certainly, no one who knew us well would expect to find money in our pockets, or even food in our stomachs!"

The bitterness of the reply carried its lesson.

"Poor Sahara!" murmured Olive. "I wish I could do something to lessen the trouble these honest men have to deal with."

"I wish you could, Heaven knows! We are to be pitied, if any one is. Don't misunderstand me, now. I am no weak complainer. I have youth and strength, and I should be a weakling if I did not feel able to cut loose and go elsewhere to seek my fortune. But would this do any good to the miners who cannot get away?"

"Certainly not," agreed Olive, hastily.

"These men and women are near the point of starvation. They are in families; they have no means of going, and nowhere to go."

"I often think it was an unlucky day for them when my uncle brought them to this camp."

"You never spoke truer words. It was a fatal day!"

Gurdon spoke vehemently. All his pent-up emotion had been aroused by the talk. The fire broke forth.

"They were brought here to suffer, to starve!" continued the miner, fiercely. "And for what? Ay, for what?"

"I do not understand."

"Never mind. I think deeply on this subject. It is not of consequence. One thing you may know, however; I would shed my blood, if need be, for these men and women!"

It was a fight with him between prudence and fiery zeal. He was deeply stirred, yet some prudence remained.

"Can you think of anything which can be done? If you can, I will speak to my uncle about it."

"Not for the world!" Gurdon exclaimed, hastily.

"No! But he might be able to carry out your views, if you could form a feasible plan."

Gurdon had grown prudent, and he was anxious to undo the damage he had gone, or might have done.

"I have no plan," he admitted. "Don't let my words weigh in the least. Of course," he added, with ill-grace and caution combined. "Mr. Hammond has studied this as no one else has. Let us not interfere with the plans of our elders. Believe me, I do not want to be quoted in connection with the affair."

"Your wishes shall be respected. I will say nothing."

The miner felt like thanking her warmly for the promise, but this he could not do. They had talked on dangerous subjects. He must trust to her honor to keep quiet, and that, too, without being able to caution her as he wished. The whole matter was very unsatisfactory, and the situation did not improve his temper. He became moody, and neither found much pleasure in the rest of the interview.

They parted near the camp, and went their separate ways.

"What is the mystery?" wondered Olive. "He is not himself, and I can't understand it at all. He did not use to be so strange in his ways. What has happened?"

She thought of the evening of the Mutual Ball, and the blood-stain she had seen on his sleeve. She shivered.

"I wish I had felt courage enough to ask him about it," was her tardy decision. "I should have asked plainly. The stain may have been all the result of chance."

She tried to believe it, but in the way of the friendly theory was the fact that his manner had been so singular on that night.

"If he can explain, why don't he do it without any leading on from me?"

It was a question which she found hard to answer, and she retired without having her curiosity satisfied. She retired, too, more anxious than ever for Gurdon Forrest.

The following morning a pair of riders came to Sahara along the so-called Shinbone trail. Spokane Saul may have been expecting them, for he met them at once, and one of the two was given more money by the Samaritan and sent back to Shinbone. The one who remained was a girl who might have been anywhere from

thirteen to sixteen years old, though she looked the former rather than the latter age. Her he conducted through the street until they arrived at Thomas Hammond's house.

Once there he sent word by the servant that he wished to see the master and mistress of the place, and Thomas and his wife entered the room at the same time, though not by design.

There they saw a plain-faced, awkward-looking girl sitting close to the Samaritan of Sahara. The latter had never looked more like himself. His chubby face was full of benign light and good will; his manner was thoroughly placid, and his hands, as usual, were crossed in front of him in that way so suggestive of meek, yet confident composure.

When he saw the new-comers he arose with a light in his eyes which was a revelation in practical goodness.

"I give you greeting, friends," he said, a blessing in every word, as should be the case with a man truly good. "I trust I see you well, and, surely, one who opens his heart to the needy and unfortunate is deserving of all possible happiness. The door of good works has a calm bliss which the selfish know not!"

The Samaritan's face was radiant as he enunciated this assertion.

"Here," he added, "is your ward, as I may say; the one to whom you have opened your hearts and home. Permit me to make you acquainted with Miss Patience Jones. Patience, your obedience!"

The girl arose and made the most awkward courtesy imaginable.

Hammond and his wife gazed at her in a stupefied way. If their home was open their hearts were not, despite the words of the true philanthropist. They had been expecting the worst and hoping for the best. They now found their fears had been more accurate than their hopes. Patience had need of her name, and of the qualities it implied. Nature had not been kind to her. She was remarkably homely; she was dull and uninteresting of appearance.

That she was not blessed with a due share of intelligence could be seen at once.

"Your ward, good friends; your ward!" added Spokane Saul, his face growing more radiant.

"So this is the girl?" returned Hammond, in a species of growl, so dissatisfied was he.

"This is the damsel."

Neither of the Hammonds spoke.

"I shall like her!" declared Patience, confidently.

"You surely will, dear child. More than that, you will find good Mr. and Mrs. Hammond eager to help you in all ways; to make your life a peaceful rest."

"Why don't they say so?" demanded Patience, practically.

"Benevolence," explained Samaritan, "is never outspoken and noisy. Look ye not to the word of man, but to his acts. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth does not always speak, but the deeds of our kind err not. Thomas will tell you so."

The mine president felt compelled to say something.

"That is a fact," he agreed.

"But you don't act as if you were pleased to see me," reiterated wisely Patience.

"Nay, nay; judge not hasty judgment," cautioned Saul. "I know our friends of old, and can answer for thy welcome. Am I not right, Thomas?"

"Yes."

Thomas spoke sullenly, but he suddenly remembered he would gain nothing by acting like a petulant child. He braced up to the occasion and really did well, outwardly. Patience was assured that she was welcome, and matters were put on a more promising footing, it seemed. Mrs. Hammond took Patience away to the room which had been prepared for her. Then Thomas turned sharply upon his remaining companion.

"What have I done that such a creature should be saddled upon me?" he demanded, ungraciously.

"My dear sir?"

"The girl is only half-witted."

"Then there is all the more need of our love and care."

"Rubbish! I don't take this kindly, Littlefinger!"

"Why, what do you mean?"

"I don't keep an asylum for idiots."

"That this child is not, my dear sir. That she is different from some others, I will admit. Yet, she has many admirable qualities, and these should over-balance all mental eccentricities. Remember the good you will do!"

"I have no more to say. I am not an angel, and don't claim to be. As a favor to you I have taken the girl in. I trust I shall not regret it, and that I shall not long be obliged to harbor her."

"Of that you can rest assured. Her nearest of kin will soon find means of caring for her in a more direct way."

"Providence grant it! But I got the idea from you that she had no kin."

"I think I observed that she had no father, which I believe to be the case. I am not so very well informed as to her history, but it is clear she is a worthy girl seeking for a hold on life."

"Well, I'll house her for awhile, but I can't have too much of it."

"Certainly not."

Thomas had spoken half-fearfully. Since he had known his secret was shared by Spokane Saul he had not felt at ease. The Samaritan had talked well enough, but his reasons for upholding Hammond in taking the lion's share from the miners had not been practical reasons, nor such as were to be expected from a truly good man. At times the latter was nervous lest trouble should come from this sharing of the secret. He had let Patience in ostensibly to please Saul, but really because he was not sure it would be safe to refuse.

Goodness, in his opinion, was only skin deep, even with the Samaritan of Sahara.

His last bold statement was experimental, but the readiness with which Saul agreed to it was soothing to his fears in a measure.

They talked on minor matters for awhile, and then Thomas had to go away. He left Saul there, and to the room, soon after, came Mrs. Pearl.

"So you're still here?" she exclaimed. "Well, I'm glad of it, for I wanted to see you."

"I am quite at your service, madam."

"How long is that young one going to be in this house?" sharply demanded the lady.

"I don't know as there is any definite time set."

"Well, there will be, right away. I want you to know I can't be made a victim of in this case! The girl is not bright. She is far from being of full mental power. Now, I can't have such a person in my house!"

Mrs. Pearl tried to say she would not, but her courage was not equal to the demands of the occasion.

"Do you not feel for one so afflicted?" inquired Saul, as calm as ever.

"Not a bit!"

Spokane sighed. It was clear that he was grieved by all this. Yet his patience was unlimited, it seemed. He was sad, but not angry.

"I waste no sympathy on the creature!" added Pearl, defiantly.

"Yet, there is a good reason why you should."

"Why?"

"Because Patience is your own daughter!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SAMARITAN AT WORK.

"WHAT?"

With the excited exclamation Mrs. Pearl leaped to her feet. True or false, the statement put her in a sudden panic. She looked at Spokane Saul as if he had roused a ghost from its grave.

He, however, was unmoved. Perhaps he was a trifle graver than usual, but nothing showed that he regarded the matter as serious. His hands were folded in the old way, and his chubby face was serene.

"I have given you this little surprise knowing it will be of interest to you. The lost is found; the lamb is in the fold."

His placidity was not contagious. Pearl gazed at him with flushed cheeks and dilated eyes.

"Saul Littlefinger, do you know what you are saying?" she imperiously demanded.

"Didn't I speak plainly?" the Samaritan answered, with a look of mild surprise.

"You certainly did, but do you know what you said?"

"Unless I made some grievous slip of the tongue, I do. Pray, did not you understand me to say that Patience was your own daughter?"

"I did; and now I ask, how dare you insult me so foully?"

"I think you misunderstand," the Samaritan gently responded. "You will remember I mentioned to you the fact that I was aware of your marriage, before you met Mr. Hammond, to one Julius Cohen. Well, I wanted to give you a surprise, so I did not state that I knew your child by that first marriage to be still alive. I could look into your mother's heart and see what was there. I thought it would be far more impressive to you if the child was brought here unknown to you; was made a member of your family ere the relationship was explained."

Spokane regarded Mrs. Pearl benignly, as if quite sure of her approval, but she burst forth fiercely:

"Saul Littlefinger, you lie!"

"My dear madam!" he mildly expostulated.

"You know there is no such tie between me and that wretched child."

"Pardon me; but I fear you are hardly calm, now. Let us not go too fast. Should you doubt the fact for one moment, I will bring evidence which will convince you and your good husband."

"Devil!"

Spokane held up his hand in silent, momentary dismay, but the mood soon passed. Once more he was calm.

"I fear you are ill, madam, and would advise due treatment. But let us speak of other matters. If you have the least doubt of the authenticity of my statement, let me give you the evidence. I have the record of your marriage, of the birth of your child, and of the matters which followed. More, I can produce the woman to whom you gave the child for safe-

keeping. Can you ask for more? Can you doubt that your long-lost one is with you?"

Mrs. Pearl sat in silence, but her eyes flashed lightning-bolts which were in total contrast to Spokane's mildness.

Goodness and hot temper seemed to have met, indeed.

She had lately had one fight with the Samaritan, to try and prevail over him. She had fought and lost. Now, she knew it would be folly to go over the ground again, but one thing she could not get out of her mind.

"If I had a dozen children, I would not believe that miserable child was one of them!" she fiercely exclaimed.

"I think you misjudge Patience. She is not what would be called a brilliant girl, perhaps, but she is far from ignorant. A little eccentric, it may be; but no more."

"She is only half-witted; that is sure. And you seek to palm her off upon me!"

"Madam, I repeat that I can prove all I allege. I can prove she is your child. If you doubt me, let Mr. Hammond weigh the evidence."

"Cold-blooded wretch! And they call you the Samaritan of Sahara! Never was name more inappropriately applied!"

The speaker paused for a moment, and then went on suddenly:

"I refuse to talk of this further, now; I want time to think. You have the upper hand, at present. I am not sure you can keep it. In what way have you got Thomas Hammond by the throat?"

"Really, I don't understand you."

"You are the prince of fiends, Thomas never let that child in here willingly. What lever did you use to bend him to your will?"

"I assure you he acted only as a benevolent gentleman."

"Gammon! I am beginning to understand you, now. Posing as a model of goodness, you are feathering your own nest in fine style. You are a humbug and an impostor. There is not one like you in all Sahara!"

"Madam, you grieve me! I never have claimed to be perfect. It is true I have treated the people, medically, for nothing. Does that make me a perfect man? Far from it. No one is perfect; not one who lives. We are all weak and erring. Yet, in my humble way, I try to do good. For my many shortcomings I am sorry, but so was man created."

"Enough! I might as well talk with a rock as you. I will talk no more. I must have time to think. Let me alone now!"

She had risen. She finished speaking; she turned and went out of the room.

Spokane Saul did not seek to stop her, but the deep sigh he drew was indicative of his frame of mind. Plainly, he regretted, but did not feel able to change the bent of her mind.

He, too, rose and went out on the street. A short distance from the house he met one of the miners. This man stopped him.

"Doctor," said he, "I have been thinking of what you said to me."

"Yes, friend?"

"I have not been able to decide on the matter. I want to see if I understand you fully. If I am right, you take all the stock of the miners off from their hands?"

"Yes; if they agree."

"But you only give them one-quarter of what they put in?"

"That is it."

"Don't we lose a good deal by that?"

"Only three-quarters," returned the Samaritan, gently.

"But that is a good deal for poor men to give up."

"Remember the mines are not paying now."

"If we sell, we abandon all chance of sharing in the profits which may come later, and what do we get in return? Only one-quarter of what we put in, and that is not enough to take us away from Sahara."

"Friend," answered the Samaritan, persuasively, "the mines here will never pay. They are utterly worthless. As long as you stick to them, you will lose your time and money. You can depend upon that. I have looked into the matter thoroughly, and you may rest assured I am correct. Now, I have a little money, and," he added, the benevolent light in his eyes growing stronger, "I know of no way in which I can do more good than to help you all to get back a measure of what you have sunk here."

"This would give you only one less share than Hammond, Wayland, Damon, Trim and Smith hold together?"

"Exactly."

"If the mines should begin to pay, you would be a rich man."

"True, but they never will pay. I am satisfied that Hammond knows this, and that he only keeps on in the desperate chance that something may turn up. Thomas is a truly good man, and his heart is about broken by your misfortunes. Poor souls! why will you longer stagger under the burden?"

The Samaritan looked up at the sky, and the miner thought he saw a tear gladden in the speaker's eye. The sight moved him deeply.

"You may be right, doctor. I know you

think you are, and I will consult with my friends."

"Do it carefully," cautioned Saul. "As I told you, I came to you with the proposal because you are the leading spirit among your people. Consult, but, as I said at the start, don't let any one into the secret except those I named to you, until you are fully decided."

"I have great faith in Gurdon Forrest and Benoni Lyon."

"They must not know!" returned Saul, hurriedly. "They are Americans; they must not know of the plan."

"That shall be as you will."

"I do not think it prudent."

"Very well; I will keep it quiet, and will see my comrades. It is likely they will be glad to give up the Sahara stock."

"Rely upon me, you will never get a dollar out of it, and you remain crippled as long as you stay here."

The miner thanked the Samaritan for his kindness, and then they separated, and each went his way. Saul was not to end his journey without another encounter. He saw Olive coming down the street. She at once gave evidence of wishing to avoid him, but he called to her and went forward quickly.

"I wished to speak with you," he observed.

"Did you?"

Her answer was not gracious, but he was not discouraged.

"It is because I have in my hands a paper which I think may be of interest to you."

"A paper?"

"Yes. Perhaps you will recognize it?"

He had produced it. He held it before her eyes. One look was enough to bring a startled expression to her face. It was the note of warning she had written in Gurdon's hut, and left the morning after the affair at the Punch-Bowl. Her color faded away. Terror seized upon her. She trembled in every limb.

"I think you recognize it," remarked Saul, gently.

"If? What do I know about it?" Olive managed to answer.

"You should know something, for it is in your hand, and was left by you in Gurdon Forrest's home. I told you before that I knew of your visit there. Now, I have positive proof of your interest in the young man."

"And what do you intend to do?" she breathlessly demanded.

"It might seem to the casual mind that it is my duty to reveal all this," slowly returned the Samaritan, "but I have too much regard for you to do it. Were I to make it public, what would be the result? Why, you would suffer in the estimation of our people, and poor Gurdon would be arrested at once; arrested for robbing Trim and Smith at the Punch-Bowl!"

"Have you no mercy?" tremulously asked Olive.

"I have. Far be it from me to do aught to worry you. Before this I have told you of my sincere regard for you. Ay, and that I would fain make you my wife!"

"If you have regard for me, give me the note."

"Later, I will. Would it not be a capital idea," the Samaritan added, smiling benignly, "to make this a wedding present to you?"

"If you are sincere, give it to me now."

"Nay, be not in haste. There is time enough. The paper shall not be lost; rely upon that!"

"Would you hold what you declare would compromise me?"

"Yes, because I will hold it so safely as to do no harm. Believe me it shall not go out of my hands."

"Doctor Littlefinger, will you not give me that note?"

"Really, I cannot. Do not think me severe, for it is of interest to me. Fear not; it will not be lost. By keeping it well, I give further proof of my devotion to you. Because of the esteem you have for Gurdon, I am keeping his secret, too. The young man is lucky to have two such friends. We will keep the secret, I say. When we are married this paper shall be burned. Have no fear. Now, Miss Olive, I have business elsewhere and will leave you. I will see you again soon. Good-day, and may all be well with you!"

With his most amiable smile the idol of Sahara passed on.

But Olive huskily whispered:

"Where now is hope for Gurdon? This man has us in his power, and he is merciless. Oh, the hypocrite, the unspeakable villain!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNPLEASANT AFFAIR.

PUYALLUP PETER put his mop away.

He looked around the main room of Damon's cafe, which he had rendered as immaculate as any one could wish, and soliloquized:

"Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them. I was born that way! I hev always had the fact thrust upon me that I was born ter be a benefit ter my fellow-men. Hyer they soil this room until it looks like a sepulcher, and I seize my utensils and put chaos ter order. Ef that

ain't greatness, what is? But I'll be durred ef every galoot is capable o' seein' the p'int. Some scoff at my trade. Yes; they do, but you bet they get the worst of it. A floor-scrubber has great opportunities, an' I seize-s onter them. It ain't safe ter fool with a mule's hind leg, an' it ain't safe ter dare a scrubber. He's got too much authority!"

Peter had just put the place to rights for the night, and was expecting the usual inflow of trade.

He had been annoyed by no less a person than Mr. Hinchman Trim. The latter was a shining light in Sahara, but he had a weakness. It was that he occasionally indulged in too much liquid enthusiasm.

Some wondered where Hinch found money enough to get drunk, but get it he did, even in poverty-stricken Sahara.

Luckily for the good name of the camp, he was the only man there who ever imbibed to excess.

"He don't want ter come monkeyin' around hyer no more," muttered Puyallup Peter. "I can't hev nobody foolin' with me in the discharge o' my perfesh'nal labors."

It was generally known that Hinch was on the war-path, and those who gathered there that night expected to see the superintendent make himself ridiculous. They came as usual, however. Such men as Wayland and Hammond rarely visited the cafe, and were not present on this occasion. Unluckily for himself, Gurdon was among those who did come.

For a long time Hinch did not appear on the scene, and the first half of the evening passed in peace and quiet when, at last, the door opened and Trim appeared.

"Hullo, fellers!" was his boisterous greeting. "How gets it? Be you all enjoyin' of yerselves? Ef you ain't, jest come an' tip the bottle with me. Great thing, the 'bot' is; fact, by thunder! I know, fer I've tipped the 'bot,' myself!"

He looked around benignly upon his companions, but no one cared to notice him. In a community of temperate men, his ways were not popular. He sat down and proceeded to act as a talking machine. He was allowed to have his own way, for he was one with no small share of authority, and the miners did not wish to have trouble with him.

If it had not been for an unfortunate circumstance, his over-indulgence would have gone as usual, as an affair of only passing moment.

While moving around the room he chanced to trip over Gurdon's feet and fell to the floor. The accident stirred up his bad blood. He never had liked the young miner, chiefly because he recognized the fact that he was one of the things the plotters of the camp had to fear. Before then they had had slight brushes of wordy warfare, and now the rankling hatred took shape.

He directed several remarks at the miner which the latter did not see fit to notice, but no one looked for any trouble.

Later, Hinch fell into meditative silence. When he had thought to his fill he arose, walked toward the door, and all thought he was about to leave the room.

Opposite Gurdon, however, he suddenly thrust out his hand, seized Forrest's nose between his thumb and finger, and gave the imprisoned organ a sharp pull.

It was the limit to endurance. Gurdon had borne his slurs, but this insult was too great to be endured. His anger arose, and so did his clinched hand. Another moment and Hinch lay sprawling on the floor, prostrated by a sharp blow.

In a moment all was confusion. It was a strange thing in law-abiding Sahara to see a man knocked down.

Hinch gathered himself up with some difficulty. His wits worked faster than his legs. Since coming to Sahara it had become a novelty to get such a blow, and, moreover, he had had great deference paid him. If the blow was a shock to his system, it was far more so a shock to his pride. He had been humbled in the presence of those he had ruled over until he imagined himself a great man, forgetting he was only a rush-light to the real leaders of the camp.

He gained an upright position, and gazed at Gurdon in a dazed way.

"You did that?—you?" he huskily spoke.

"It was your own work," Gurdon answered.

"You have only yourself to blame."

"Myself? Durn it! I blame you!—you! D'ye hear?"

"I hear; but the claim is not well made. You began the trouble. If there is anything out of your liking, it is your own look-out."

"It is, is it? Durn yel you can't put it off that way! Ef you're scared it won't do ye an atom o' good. Critter, you've got ter answer fer that blow!"

"How?"

"How? You've got ter be licked! Why, you little sneakin' coyote, I'll chaw ye all up fer it! You miser'ble beggar! you lousy coward! you horse-thief! I'll make you cry fer mercy like a baby!"

Hinch managed to say a good deal that was mean, if it was not all to the point. He was boiling with wrath, and his chief desire was to insult Gurdon. If he went erratically, it was

not a sign he was less in earnest than if he had been sober. He was eager to do mischief.

He circled around without being able to decide on any plan of action for some time. Then he had his idea. A pail of water, by no means clean, stood at one side. He suddenly caught this up, and with one long sweep, flung its contents full at Gurdon. The latter could not escape such a general shower. It fell over him in over-generous quantities, even as it did on all others who were sitting close at hand; it was a shower-bath for all.

If Hinch had been in any camp but Sahara he would have had a series of fights on his hands at once, but the Swedes were not only slow to rise in wrath, but they were too prudent to anger one with the power Hinch possessed.

Gurdon was not of that way of thinking. The soiled water was not less disagreeable to him because others had shared it with him; he arose, seized Mr. Hinch Trim again, and flung him aside so skillfully that he crushed a chair in his involuntary journey, and then fell in a heap on the floor.

It was an unlucky evening for Hinchman.

Gurdon did not wait to see the result of his work. Rising, he passed out of the cafe without a word to any one.

Of those who remained, some sympathized with him, and others with the fallen bully. Was not the latter a man of authority?

Hinch gathered himself up slowly. He was a tough man, in a double sense, but now he was seriously shaken. For some time he sat in a humble attitude. He brushed his hand across his eyes as if there was some obstruction there. It was a marked pause before he spoke.

Finally he looked about in a more observing way.

"Where is he?" Hinch asked, in a husky voice.

"Gone out," a miner replied, meekly, like one anxious to keep clear of all possible trouble.

"He did a cowardly thing!"

There was a difference of opinion on that point.

"He took me unaware when I was jest playful," was the next remarkable assertion. "I didn't do nothin' ter him, an' he hit me as only a coward would do. It wa'n't right!"

Hinch struggled with his feelings. To himself he had then and there vowed he would settle the score with Gurdon, but he had prudent enough to dissemble. Hiding his bitter anger, he went on in assumed meekness:

"I don't want ter do nobody wrong. Ef I hev, I'm willin' ter do all I kin ter set it right. I'll beg Gurdon's pardon. I don't want ter use nobody bad!"

Observing men ought to have seen that this was the remark of a hypocrite. Had Puyallup Peter been present he certainly would have detected the fact. No one there did, perhaps.

"I'll go ter Gurd!"

Hinch gathered himself up on his feet and made a motion to leave the room.

"I'll go with ye," volunteered a miner.

"No; let me go alone."

"But you may get hit again."

"No. I'll go ter him with a plea fer paroon on my lips. He won't refuse that, fer he ain't a hard man. I'm willin' fer ter do all I kin ter have peace!"

Waving them back, Hinch went out alone.

Then they began to look at one another in a way more expressive than words would have been. Such trouble was unknown in Sahara.

Then conversation began. The supporters of the superintendent had it all to themselves. Those who sympathized with Gurdon dared say nothing. As a result, the young miner was severely criticised. It was declared that he had acted a cowardly part, and those who felt that Hinch had got only what he deserved remained silent.

The latter was so thoroughly obeyed that no one passed the door in the next half-hour. Then a miner decided to return home. He went out, but almost at once he sounded a cry which brought the others to his side. The cause of his outcry was then quickly seen.

On the ground lay a man who seemed to be dead, and the red stains on his face and hands told a story no one could fail to read.

"Why, it's Hinch!" exclaimed Olaf Borst.

"An' dead, too!"

Awe and dismay were in the ejaculations.

A more thoughtful man dropped on his knees beside the fallen superintendent.

"He's alive, but durn me ef I don't think he's about gone!"

"Carry him in!"

The order came from Andrew Damon, who had suddenly appeared on the scene, and it was promptly obeyed. Hinch gave no signs of life beyond the fact that he was still breathing. Damon was still practical. He hustled a messenger away to summon Doctor Littlefinger, and then himself began to look for the wound which had laid Hinch low. It was not difficult to find it.

On the superintendent's head was a lacerated hurt, made, it was clear, with some blunt weapon. It had torn the scalp and stunned the recipient, but the exact extent of the damage no one there could tell.

"Who has done this?" Damon demanded.

He had no answer.

"Has there been trouble?"

"Yes," replied a miner, feebly.

"Who was in it?"

A long pause ensued; then one man found speech:

"Hinch an' Gurdon Forrest had a scrap."

Damon started.

"That man? By my life! it would be just like him to do this deed. I never had any good opinion of him. A rough, rebellious, scowling fellow. What did they quarrel over?"

The story was soon told. At that moment even Hinch's adherents were cautious, and nobody tried to create a prejudice against the suspected man. It was not necessary; Damon was only too glad to get a chance to work against one whom the rulers had always regarded as dangerous. He ordered:

"Hustle away, some of you, and find the villain. He did it, of course! Arrest him on sight. Do it peacefully if you can, but do it anyhow. I give you authority to use the severest means, if necessary. Bring him in, at any cost!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ACCUSATION.

If Damon had spoken what was in his mind he would have said: "Bring him dead or alive, and dead rather than living!" but he was not so indiscreet as that. He had given the order; he hoped the miner would resist so as to make the severer way necessary.

Searchers went out, and then work was resumed on Hinch.

"He ain't so bad hurt," remarked one of the extemporaneous surgeons.

"Isn't he?" Damon retorted. "Do you call that ragged gash nothing?"

"I didn't mean that. What I was tryin' ter say was, he's already gettin' his senses back."

"Say what you mean, hereafter!"

Snapping out this retort, the keeper of the cafe aided in giving Hinch more water than he had seen for many a day, and the result was, he soon opened his eyes and looked around in a wondering way.

"Remain quiet!" cautioned Damon. "Don't stir!"

"Don't stir!" returned Hinch, in surprise. "Durn it! what be you givin' us? No jokes on old travelers, now!"

His voice was firm, and most of those present believed he was not at all badly hurt, but Damon hastily exclaimed:

"Don't be rash! You've been assaulted. Don't ruin your chances of recovery by any indiscretion."

He forced Hinch back on the couch, and the injured man lay quiet. For a moment he meditated; then a cunning gleam appeared in his eyes. He groaned dismally.

"I'm a dead man!" he moaned.

"Do you suffer much?"

"I'm jest a-burnin' up! My blood is all in a fever! My bones are warpin' all out o' shape, I'm so beset with pain. My hands an' feet are stone cold. I'm in a total collapse!"

This remarkable combination of symptoms was bad enough, but that they were not all was soon proven.

"I'm weak," averred the wounded man; and thereupon he extended his hand, but at once dropped it again. "I can't hold it up!" he groaned.

As he had but the moment before raised himself wholly to his elbow, this sudden increase of weakness might have impressed some as peculiar. But Damon shook his head gravely.

"A bad case, a bad case! Hinch, who did it?"

"Who, but Gurd Forrest!" shouted Hinch, with another run of strength. "He did it; he did! He was the one, an' I never did a thing ter him, never! He laid in wait fer me, an' he jest lambasted me when I wa'n't lookin'. Ef I had been, he never would 'a' made it work. I'd 'a' done him up, sudden, you bet!"

"He did not do it in fair fight, then?"

"He? You bet he didn't. It was a cowardly deed. But that ain't all!" declared Hinch, with a sudden glow, as if he had just thought of something, himself.

"What more?"

"Jest afore he hit me, he leaned over me an' says he: 'I am the man who did you up at the Punch-Bowl! I ain't afeerd ter say it,' says he, 'fer you won't never hev a chance ter tell of it. Die!' says he, 'die, you sneak; this squares the debt!'"

Damon knew from his companion's manner that he was lying, and was rather dazed by his audacity, but Hinch was equal to any emergency, just then.

"Boys, he's the road-agent, sure!" he added. "Now, remember there is a reward offered for his capture. Away you go, an' get that reward!"

The suggestion was like a spur. Money was the crying need of Sahara, and every one was anxious to fill his pockets therewith. To urge them was not necessary. With the idea of gain working in their minds they hurried out as one man. The two conspirators were left alone.

"Hinch," said Damon, irritably, "why do you want to lie so atrociously?"

"Because I'm goin' ter git square with Gurd Forrest!" declared the ruffian, vindictively.

"Would you send him to the rope?"

"I would, by the demons!"

"Was it he who hit you?"

"I don't know who biffed me, outside; I didn't see him, at all. It may hev been a total stranger. But I've got a chance ter git even with Gurd, an' I'm goin' ter do it!"

There was no limit to his hatred, it seemed, but Damon was by no means sure the sacrifice would be allowed. It was too late to check the search, then, but he was of the opinion they would yet have to put in the explanation that Hinch had been out of his head when he made the accusation.

Unpopular as Gurdon was with the rulers of Sahara, it would not do to send him to an unmerited fate. If this was done, and the real criminal was found later on, the miners would be likely to make a disturbance which would affect the internal management of the camp. Nobody's personal grudge must be allowed to wreck the gigantic fraud at the town.

No doctor was needed to sit on Hinch's case. He had a bad scalp wound, but nothing that would injure him, unless he committed some rank indiscretion. He would be able to go about the place in the morning, if he saw fit.

When the next day dawned Sahara had a sensation. The news went abroad that Gurdon Forrest was in custody charged with a double offense. He was not only the assailant of another citizen, but, by his own confession, was the now-notorious road-agent of the Punch-Bowl. Many doubted the confession, however.

An accused man gets but little sympathy, or hearing, except from his best friends. Thus, it was not strange that nothing was said in his favor except that, although Hinch declared he had admitted his connection with the Punch-Bowl affair at the time of the last assault, Gurdon stoutly denied having had any part in that matter.

Some believed him innocent; more believed he was guilty.

No time was lost in trying him. The case came up during the forenoon, and all Sahara was there.

Gurdon did not look the criminal. He bore himself well. He realized that he could not hope for anything if he let his antipathy to the ruling powers be seen, so he curbed the sullen discontent which had marked his manner for a long time, and was so manly that he gained old friends back again.

Hinch was there, too, acting like one desperately weak from his injuries, and eager to complete the ruin of the man he hated so fervently without good cause.

By unanimous consent, Spokane Saul was made the presiding officer, and had not long been in the official chair before nearly every one decided he was a very good one.

Olive Hammond was in attendance, like all her friends, and she did not agree with the majority. As soon as the trial began she decided that the so-called Samaritan had resolved to ruin the prisoner, then and there.

If Olive read aright, he was disguising the bitterest hatred under the mask of his usual mild and benign manner. She noticed that all his decisions were against Gurdon, and though he began to talk of giving the latter fair play, almost at the first, he so ruled that an angel of light could not have escaped the toils—that was the way she saw it.

Witnesses were called who told of the trouble at Damon's, and then Hinch had his day.

He made the most of it.

He told the story as he had told it when he first recovered from his unconscious state, and not only swore he had recognized Gurdon as his assailant, but that the latter had tauntingly declared he was the road-agent of the Punch-Bowl.

Spokane Saul sighed deeply on hearing this testimony, and Olive's face grew pale with anger.

"The wretch is united with the others in swearing his life away!" she indignantly thought.

Hinch retired with the help of Damon's arm.

The Samaritan's chubby face was unmoved. Mild composure was there personified.

"Is there any other witness?" he asked, as benignly as if he were a philanthropist calling for the "order of business."

Olive had listened to all. She had listened, and she had seen the net close hopelessly around Gurdon. If the testimony already in was accepted, and no more was presented, the young miner was a doomed man. She did not know whether he was innocent or guilty—in her present mood she was not capable of telling just what she did think—but a sudden, desperate impulse came to her to strike a blow for the one she loved.

Rising, she moved quickly forward.

"I am here as a witness!" she announced.

A hush fell over the people there. They saw the leading young lady of the camp standing with flushed cheeks and strangely-glittering eyes—a witness no one would have dreamed of looking for then. It was a surprise so deep that

all stared blankly. Even Spokane Saul, supposed to be proof against emotion, failed to speak at once.

His big eyes dilated; he seemed to be under the common spell.

Yet, he was soon himself.

"Very well," he returned, gently. "I need not introduce the witness. What have you to tell, Miss Hammond?"

Sure enough! What had she to tell? She knew nothing! She had acted impulsively; acted with the determination to save Gurdon, right or wrong; but her story was not ready. What could she say? Gurdon, himself, unconsciously leaned forward. Another witness? What did she know about the matter?

CHAPTER XX.

THE WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE.

"We are waiting for you!"

Spokane Saul spoke blandly, and Olive realized that the time had come when she must speak or remain forever silent on the subject. She was on the witness stand, and did not even know her own story.

The eyes turned upon her seemed to burn her flesh, and she made a desperate effort.

"Mr. Trim has said that, just before he was struck down by his assailant, he heard the church clock strike ten. If this is right, he is mistaken in the man who wounded him. I was at the window, last night, and I saw Gurdon Forrest outside."

Gurdon drew a deep breath. He had not been near the Hammond house the night before.

"He was walking slowly," Olive went on, gathering strength as her story took form. "He was coming from the direction of Damon's, but at a very leisurely pace. By the tree near our house he halted to light a cigar. The wind was strong, and it was not easy to do as he wished. He was bothered for some time, and I could not help laughing at his predicament. He succeeded, at last, and then he stood still for some minutes—at least five, I should say—after which he walked on toward the east side of the camp. It was while he stood there that the clock struck ten. He had come slowly, and it is five minutes' rapid walk to Damon's."

Olive ceased.

Her story was told, and not only that, but she had, in the last few words, acted as lawyer, as well.

She ceased, and left Hinch red-faced with rage and Gurdon open-eyed with surprise, but while the latter quickly recovered his wits, the superintendent lost his entirely.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "Nothin' of the kind ever happened. The gal dreamed it all, or she has lied!"

"Hush! hush!" put in the Samaritan, in mild disapproval. "Do not use such strong language. I assure you it is very unbecoming, Mr. Trim. But do you not see that the lady may be in error? Allow me to conduct the matter to a sequel. We all know you would not misrepresent, Mr. Trim."

Bitterly did Olive rebel, in secret. Spokane Saul gave the low ruffian a certificate of good character, but there was no intimation that she was equally trustworthy. The Samaritan turned to her in his blandest way.

"Miss Olive, you are sure you heard the clock strike?" he asked, gently.

"I am, sir."

"Did you take the circumstance to mind, especially?"

"Not then."

"How, then, can you say positively that it was not before Mr. Forrest's coming that it struck?"

"Because I know it was not!" was her logical and decided reply.

"Yet, you did not then take it to mind."

"I have simply told what I saw and heard," Olive defiantly returned.

"The night was dark. Might you not have been mistaken in the identity of the man you saw?"

"No, sir."

"You looked at the man attentively, did you?"

"I recognized Gurdon Forrest!"

If lightning had been a thing to be had at command, the light of her eyes might well have consumed Saul Littlefinger. Not once questioning the truth of Hinch's story, he was subjecting her to the closest catechism. He had never been milder of manner, yet she would have staked all that he was doing this because Gurdon was the prisoner.

"Infamous wretch!" she murmured, under her breath, and could hardly avoid uttering the exclamation aloud.

Her system of replies was not calculated to give the good judge new ideas, and he rolled his eyes upward and studied the ceiling attentively, as if in search of inspiration. He was interrupted in this.

"If the present witness is done, I will be heard!"

So spoke a new voice, and when the crowd looked they fell into new wonder. There stood

Brown Bet, the Banshee, bony and homely as ever, grim of face and unmoved of manner.

"You?" returned Saul, with the least trifle of surprise.

"Why not?" retorted Bet, tartly.

"There is no reason in the world, my good woman, though I am rather reluctant to have you brand this young man with guilt."

"How do you know I am going to?"

"Pardon me, madam! Now, if you know aught, pray proceed with your narrative," Saul benignly directed.

"Well, the girl is right, and all others wrong," Bet coolly announced. "Forrest isn't guilty, for he was nowhere near Damon's when the assault took place. To that I can swear!"

Hinch grew pale with anger.

"Remember, witness," cautioned Saul, "this is a serious matter. Say nothing which you cannot maintain."

"Don't you worry about me!" the Banshee retorted. "I am capable of telling my story without your help!"

"I protest against this!" exclaimed Hinch. "Is our good doctor to be badgered by this miserable woman?"

"Miserable, yourself!" snapped Bet. "What reason has such an old whisky-barrel as you to put in your lip when an honest woman is speaking? You would rob a church for the pewter on the candlesticks!"

Hammond rose.

"This is a very unseemly contention!" he sternly declared. "Doctor Littlefinger, you are too easy with these people. I must ask you to use your authority, or let me do it for you. We cannot have bickering and recrimination, here."

"Then keep your champion quiet!" retorted Bet, fearlessly. "I came here as a witness, and attacked no one. I wish to attack no one, now; but I am not going to be sat down on by this imp of ugliness."

"There is a measure of justice in this claim," Saul confessed, almost sadly. "Woman, tell your story, and I promise you shall have due hearing. Proceed!"

Hinch was not satisfied, and his will to override was as strong as ever, but Hammond gave him a warning glance. They ran the camp, but this they could not do if they let the people see so plainly that no one could have any chance except those who testified as they wished. Better clear Gurdon than to lose their own hold on the miners.

Bet was directed to tell her story, and she went ahead fluently.

"When the trouble took place at Damon's I was near at hand. I saw it all. Then I saw Forrest come out and go toward the east side of the camp. My path was in the same direction, and I went—not followed, but went, understand; in the same course. I saw him go as far as Hammond's house; I saw him stop by the tree to light his cigar; I saw him stand there for some time, and then move on. I had waited for him to go because it was my intention to accost him, but I changed my mind when at this stage."

"Can you swear it was he?" asked Spokane Saul.

"I can."

"It was dark—"

"Don't I know that as well as you?"

The Banshee's retort impressed all others as being worthy of severe reproof, but his patience and kindness seemed without limit or flaw.

"No doubt," he agreed. "Well, as to the clock? Did you hear that strike?"

"I did, and it was while Forrest was by the tree. All this is correct. All is as the girl said."

There was a murmur of satisfaction. Gurdon had few enemies and many friends, and those who had wavered were now convinced and heartily pleased to see things going his way. The testimony of the Banshee might have been over-ridden under ordinary circumstances, but when it agreed with Olive's no one would dare ignore or question that of the mine-president's daughter.

Gurdon seemed to be saved.

But the Samaritan turned to Hinchman Trim.

"Now, as to your testimony, friend," he gently went on. "Is it not possible that you were mistaken in thinking the clock struck just as you were assaulted?"

"Yes it is possible!" Hinch admitted, in haste.

"Now I think of it, I reckon it was after I had begun to get my senses back; say ten minutes after I was knocked down. Yes; I ain't any doubt but that was it, now I reflect."

Again Olive's eyes blazed indignation at the Samaritan. In her opinion, when the ingenuity of a lying witness failed, a judge who should have been impartial had descended so low—out of selfish motives—as to "coach" him. Certainly, Saul had given Hinch a new lease on life.

But a dozen miners spoke at once.

"Hinch didn't get his senses back until long after ten, an' from the time when we found him, an' when he went out, that couldn't 'a' been possible. If he heard the clock, it was before he was struck down. That's certain!"

So testified one of their number, and others were eager to corroborate the statement.

An indignant murmur rose from some who had no testimony to give, but regarded Gurdon

as proved innocent, and were angry with the course of the prosecution. Hammond got up hastily.

"Doctor Littlefinger," he spoke, "I do not wish to interfere with the judge in this case, but it seems to me the prisoner is fully proven not guilty. While we all know Mr. Trim is as reliable as any man in Sahara, we must remember he was the victim of an atrocious assault. In view of this, let us also remember he was in just that mental state when the most honest are liable to mistakes of judgment and fact. I hold Forrest proven innocent!"

Thomas Hammond did not deserve credit for any spirit of justice, then. He was prudent; no more.

He knew the people would not tolerate further persecution of one they loved, and he made haste to get on the popular side and maintain his own popularity.

A cheer followed his little speech, and then Spokane Saul rose to his feet.

He looked at Gurdon, and never had the spirit of good will been more fully shown than in the beaming gaze he bent upon the miner.

"Mr. Forrest," he benignly said, "you have been heard in your own defense, and with what result no one can question. Once more you go forth a free man—go forth to breathe the air of our loved town, and with a spotless reputation. Let me congratulate you! One's reputation is his all in this life. To you it must be a sense of great joy, and to those who have not been tried in the fire it will speak of the value of that spotless name you enjoy. Prisoner, you are free! Go, and take my good wishes with you! Ay, and take the good wishes of all. We are your brothers, friend Forrest; your brothers and sisters. We all congratulate you. May sunshine evermore be in your life!"

A cheer followed the speech.

It was in part for Gurdon, freed; in part for the Samaritan, the pride of Sahara, and the one truly good man of the range.

Yes, Gurdon was free!

But Olive, looking at the Banshee, wondered: "Why did she corroborate my fiction? Did I, unknown to myself, really tell the truth? Or why did she give such testimony?"

And Puyallup Peter, standing well back in the room, whispered to himself:

"I had made up my mind to go on the stand an' lie Gurdon out o' the fix, but it seems he had witnesses in plenty who didn't hev ter lie."

And Gurdon, himself, receiving the congratulations of his friends, thought in perplexity:

"Why did these women save me? Both went ahead and told a story which had no foundation in fact. I am amazed!"

CHAPTER XXI.

PATIENCE JONES.

SHE was small, but she filled a large niche at Thomas Hammond's.

There are times when a person of mind not exactly strong will be more conspicuous than one the reverse. It was so with Patience Jones. If she had been quick-witted and sensitive, she would have seen she was not a welcome guest, and brooded over the fact. As it was, she simply set Thomas and wife down as eccentric, and rested serene in that belief.

Truly, the girl was an eyesore to Thomas and Mrs. Pearl. They hated her because she had been forced upon them as a guest. They would, perhaps, have made her life so unpleasant that she would have found existence at the house not worth living, but she did not seem to notice their rebuffs.

Slight and half-veiled insults made no impression upon her, it seemed. Either she was very shallow, or—the possibility occurred to them at times—very deep. Which?

Patience found one friend. Olive had a nature prone to feel for all who were unfortunate. She would have shrunk from Patience because she was in some way the friend, ally, *protegee* or figure-head of Spokane Saul, but the simplicity of the child appealed to Olive in spite of her efforts to resist the feeling. Lacking in common sense as she certainly appeared to be, she deserved sympathy. So Olive thought.

The morning after the trial Patience came to Olive in the latter's room. Patience looked innocent. She had something to say, and she said it.

"Do you like Gurdon Forrest?"

The question was so sudden that guilty Olive felt the blood rush to her face.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Do you like Gurdon Forrest?" distinctly repeated the girl.

"What a question! And what do you know about Mr. Forrest?"

"He's the man who did the robbing at the Packer-Bowl."

"Why do you say that?"

"I heard two men talking on the street, and they said that though he had been acquitted, there might be something in the charges against him, for he had always been a kicker against the way things were going at Sahara. They did not believe he was the road-agent, but they wondered if he was."

Olive was silent with dismay. From the first she had seen that this bringing of Gurdon into

prominence might result in too much notice being taken of him, in other ways. With men talking of him in connection with past events, he was liable to gather trouble, like a rolling snowball. It was a painful thought. Once more Patience aroused her.

"Do you like Gurdon?"

Again Olive started. Patience had a direct way of getting at matters which was very trying to weak nerves.

"Why do you ask such a question?" she returned.

"Because you stood up for him at the trial."

"It was my duty to do it."

"But what you said was not true, you know."

"What?"

Patience had made the remark in the most matter-of-fact way, but Olive's reply was not of like character.

"You said you saw him out by the tree. If it had been anybody but you I should have got up and said that wasn't true. You went to bed at nine o'clock."

"Didn't you see me get up again?"

"No. Perhaps you did, but Gurdon was not out by the tree. I am sure of that."

"How can you be?"

"Because I didn't feel like sleep, and I went out and sat under the tree myself, from about a quarter to nine until 'most eleven! If Gurdon had been near there, I should have seen him. But nobody came near, not even Brown Bet. If it had been anybody but you, I should have got up and said, 'That ain't so!'"

Patience was placid. Not the least trace of excitement marred her composure, but she had thrown a bombshell into Olive's camp, as it were.

What power of mischief this girl had!

Suddenly it occurred to Olive that she might have been directed by Spokane Saul to ask just these questions.

"Patience," she inquired, "who are you?"

"Eh?"

"Doctor Littlefinger is your friend?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't you know?"

"No."

Patience spoke thoughtfully. Then she hesitated, looked doubtful and added:

"He says he is, and I suppose it must be so."

"Is he related to you?"

"Dear me! no; I never saw him until a few days ago."

"Why did he bring you here?"

"I'll tell you all about it, though he said I was not to tell," answered Patience, with a sudden burst of confidence. "I always lived at Frog Paradise—born there, I reckon; for there wasn't room for me anywhere else. I don't know much about it, anyhow. They call me Patience Jones, so I s'pose I am. That's all I know. Well, I lived there with old Mother Flip, the cook at the Fallstaff Hotel! My! but didn't she just make me dance! She could get more work out of any one than six ordinary persons. Whew! but how she did make things hum!"

Patience was momentarily lost in admiration of the "humming" abilities of the amiable Mother Flip, but Olive was not.

"What had Spokane Saul to do with it?"

"He came and saw Mother Flip and had a long talk with her, and then they called me in and asked me if I would like to live here. I said I would, and I'm glad I did. Nothing to do, and all I want to eat. It's jolly, ain't it?"

"Why did they want you to come here?"

"I don't know."

Olive looked at Patience sharply. What use could she be to the Samaritan? And if she was of no use, why did he want her there? Was she really not the simple creature she seemed?

"Patience, have I been good to you?"

"Nobody else was ever so good."

"I hope you won't forget that in the future."

"I won't. I'll be ready to do all I can for you. If you need help, just you let me know!"

Patience spoke with enthusiasm, and it seemed genuine. Still, Olive was not prepared to trust her implicitly. As a *protegee* of Spokane Saul she was open to suspicion, if nothing more.

Soon after this Patience went out of the room, and Olive took her way to the piazza. There she made an attempt to read. While thus engaged she heard Mrs. Pearl Hammond moving around her room, but gave no heed to the fact. Later, there was a footstep in the hall which she readily recognized as that of Patience. She expected the girl to join her, but suddenly heard the voice of her step-aunt.

"Come in here!"

The request was not directed to Olive, so it could have but one meaning. It was Patience who was thus honored—a peculiar fact.

Patience obeyed.

"Olive has gone for a walk, hasn't she?" Mrs. Pearl inquired.

"Yes," returned Patience.

"Then I want to talk to you."

Olive had no cause for acting the listener, but she did not see any reason why she should take the trouble to contradict a mistake which did not seem important, since she was not asked for.

"Sit down!" added the lady.

Olive looked in through the lace curtains. She saw Mrs. Pearl regarding Patience in a strange way, while the latter sunk into the easy-chair with the peculiar mixture of mental composure and physical torture she always exhibited when called upon to occupy a like seat. All this Mrs. Pearl saw not, but her gaze grew more intense. She seemed to be trying to read something in the simple-minded child's face.

"What is your name?" she suddenly, abruptly asked.

"Patience Jones."

"I mean, your real name."

"Why, I ain't got but one."

"Was your father named Jones?"

"Dunno! Never saw or heard of him," indifferently replied Patience.

"And your"—Mrs. Pearl's voice faltered—"your mother?"

"Never heard of her, neither."

"You have some one who is related to you?"

"Never heard of any."

Patience remained wholly indifferent. If she had the least interest in the examination, the fact did not appear. While Pearl regarded her so intently her own ambitions seemed bound up in a bit of candy which she chewed in a listless manner which did not add to her intelligence of look.

"You came from Frog Paradise, did you?"

"Yep," trabbly returned Patience.

"And where did you live before that?"

"Dunno! Guess I didn't live nowhere."

"What was your mother's name?"

"Say, didn't I tell ye I don't know as I ever had any?"

"You did, but you must have some idea who you are."

"Well, ain't I? I'm Patience Jones!"

Mrs. Pearl leaned forward in her chair.

"Come here!" she directed.

Patience came.

She was still impassive, but by that time Olive was becoming interested. The expression of her step-aunt's face and her manner were alike strange; so very strange that no one who knew her well could fail to be wrought up more or less by her interest in the simple-minded child. Olive's book was forgotten. She watched and listened eagerly.

Mrs. Pearl's way might have frightened any one less rock-bound in natural composure, but Patience remained calm as the lady quickly pushed up the sleeve of her dress and sought for some certain mark on the slender arm above. Eagerly she searched for awhile, then suddenly she stopped and gazed in silence. Her eyes were more unnatural than before.

"Reckon I got a burn there, some time," commented Patience, calmly.

The lady dropped the arm.

"Go, go!" she ordered, in a husky voice. "Go, I have no more time to fool away with you. Go!"

The simple-minded girl looked surprised, but she was not allowed to have her time in going. Mrs. Pearl arose, took her by the shoulders, and put her forcibly out of the room. Then she locked the door, and Patience was, indeed, barred out.

Mrs. Pearl turned away. She walked with an uncertain step to the supply of water which stood on the table. She reached out her hand toward it. She did not touch it.

Instead, at the last moment, she reeled, took one aimless step, put out her hand blindly, and fell to the floor in a swoon.

CHAPTER XXII.

GURDON'S CASE.

THERE never had been anything in common between Olive and her step-aunt, but the former's sympathies were so quick that, as soon as she could recover in a measure from her own amazement at seeing Mrs. Pearl faint, she was about to rush in and give her aid to the fallen woman, but prudence returned to her.

There had been some good reason for this swoon. Perhaps it would be well not to be too precipitate.

Secrets are sometimes better left alone than meddled with.

Believing thus, Olive took another course. Going to another part of the house, she found an excuse which sent a servant to the room. So Mrs. Pearl was found, and, in due time, resuscitated.

She had an explanation of her condition which made no mention of Patience Jones.

Olive did not appear in the affair at all, but she did what might yet be worse for her step-aunt's chances—she meditated. Up to that date the meditation bore no fruit. She could not see why Mrs. Pearl should faint just after seeing Patience Jones. As for the latter, Olive found her outside the house and laid a plan to see the arm at which Hammond's wife had looked so earnestly. It was not difficult.

She saw the arm, and saw a scar just above the elbow.

It was the mark of a burn.

Had that caused the trouble with Mrs. Pearl?

Olive believed it had, not because of the scar in itself, but because it had enabled her to make

some identification which was startling. No wonder she had looked at Patience intently.

Considerable time Olive devoted to thinking about the matter, and with so much in the present which was dark, and so much in the future which was threatening, she was not likely to forget the mark on Patience's arm.

Unconscious of the drama going on around her, it seemed, Patience talked for awhile, when Olive dispensed with her company and went away alone.

Her course was up the range, but she was almost unconscious of the direction until she suddenly noticed she was near the limit of the camp. Only a few rods away was Gurdon Forrest's shanty.

She stopped short. She was not sure she wanted to see the young miner, and though she supposed him to be at work, she felt it was possible that she might encounter him there.

While she stood in irresolution, footsteps sounded behind her. She turned quickly, and saw that her wishes amounted to but little in the case. She was too late to avoid the encounter.

Gurdon was there, already.

He advanced with eagerness in strong contrast to his peculiar conduct of the last few days.

"Miss Olive, I am glad to meet you!" he exclaimed. "I wanted to see you very much."

"Did you?"

Olive felt that she had a grievance, and her manner was far from cordial as she spoke.

"I did, indeed," the miner continued, rapidly.

"I need hardly say that one reason therefore grew out of the late trial. Miss Olive, I want to thank you for your kindness in testifying in my behalf. It was timely; it was kind and noble in you!"

She could not avoid a frown at him, then.

"How could I do otherwise? Did I not know you were innocent?"

Gurdon's gaze wavered.

"It was well you saw me by the tree," he observed, in a low voice.

"Then I really did see you there?"

"Have you any doubt of it?" Forrest returned, trying to look innocent and surprised.

"I have a good deal of doubt," was her prompt retort. "To you I need not hesitate to speak freely. I did not see you by the tree. I know that, and unless there is more than the wonderful in the matter, you are aware of it, also. I did not see you, and I am of the opinion you were not there, if the Banshee did corroborate my story."

"Yet, you testified in my behalf."

Gurdon was sorry for the speech the moment it was made, and all the more sorry when he saw the flush which mounted to Olive's face.

"Why will you remind me of my perjury?" she demanded.

"I beg your pardon," he quickly requested.

"I was thoughtless, stupid, but perhaps pardonable in a degree, because my mind was on other things. Don't let us call this perjury. You were not under oath, remember! It saved me from, I know not what."

"You forget the Banshee."

"A strange woman!" murmured Forrest, thoughtfully. "I know not what to think of her. She has prophesied darkly concerning me; has allotted to me a most dismal future, yet she seems willing to do her share to ward off the damage. She may not be all evil. Evil! She came to my aid like the best of friends!"

"You also had a good judge," put in Olive, as an experiment.

The miner frowned.

"Why did Spokane Saul seek to cast doubt on the testimony of my witnesses, and to present that of the opposition as beyond question? Frankly, I have lost faith in this so-called Samaritan. I see in him only a wily, tricky fellow who is bent on following the course of his prejudices, be they in the way of justice or injustice."

"You voice my opinion. I can give no evidence, but I say, beware of Spokane Saul where your interests and his run not in one channel."

"How art the mighty fallen! He has been a sort of god. He is yet, with all but you and me; but I, at least, see in him a decidedly 'heathen' god: one not to be honored, too."

"You were unfortunate to have this trouble with Hinch Trim."

"I suppose I was unpardonably rash; in fact, I would give much to undo the damage—not for my own sake, but for that of the men and women, here. I ought not to have heeded Hinch, but the fellow has been venting his ill-will on me for a long time past. He went too far, that time. Still, I should have endured that meekly. No one has a right to do or say anything which will injure Sahara and its unfortunate people. Deeply do I regret my precipitate act. Why was I so stupid?"

The speaker's manner bore testimony to the sincerity of his words.

"Beware of him, hereafter!"

"The warning is timely."

"They may even try to connect you with the affair at the Punch-Bowl."

"True," Gurdon admitted, frowning.

"I suppose you could clear yourself?"

The miner did not reply. He stood looking at the ground in moody silence.

"I am told that since the last affair some persons do not hesitate to couple your name with the robbery."

Gurdon suddenly burst forth:

"Is Sabara blind? Cannot our people see that they are being robbed by these men who rule us?"

"Can you prove that?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot."

"Then see that you speak not so freely to any one else."

"You are right. I should do, not talk."

"What can you prove?"

Again the miner grew wary. Olive had helped him, but was she not the niece of one of the rulers of the town? He regretted his precipitation, now.

"I speak in general terms."

"Mr. Forrest, can you not trust me?"

"I surely can, and if I had aught to tell I should be glad to speak out. Of course, however, the mere dissatisfaction of one who rebels against the hard lot of his fellow-men is not of more than passing consequence. I know nothing, and ought to say nothing. Please do not take my aimless words as serious matter."

He ceased and there was silence. Olive was too much disappointed to continue. She felt that, after her service in his behalf, she ought to be more trusted, yet she could not very well avow her want of sympathy for the ruler of the camp until Gurdon had led the way, or made known that he felt for her a more than passing interest.

Her wandering gaze caught sight of a man who was standing some rods away, regarding them closely. In time of danger the wits work quickly, if not always accurately, and she at once arrived at the conclusion he was watching them.

She became on the alert.

"Do not look up at once, but take your time to glance at a man who is over by the red rocks. He seems like a stranger to me."

Thus cautioned, Gurdon did take his time, but when he saw the person a cloud appeared on his face.

"He certainly is not one of our people, and I never saw him until to-day. Since morning, however, he has twice appeared to my sight. On the other occasion, as now, he seemed to be very much interested in my affairs, if close regard on his part indicates anything."

Olive changed color.

"Why should he be?"

"I don't know."

"Do you mean he follows you?"

"I am more than half inclined to think that is just it. It may be all chance, but why he should have business wherever I go I can't imagine, unless he is acting the spy!"

"O! Gurdon, what can it mean?" and the girl fell to trembling.

She had all along been haunted by the fear that the rulers would bring some one to Sabara who had a peculiar gift for unraveling mysteries, and that harm would come of it.

"That fellow may be dogging me!" admitted the miner, like one who speaks his thoughts aloud.

"Why should he?"

"True!"

Each could have found an answer to the question. It was too early to get any one there to look into Hinchman Trim's case, but just about enough time had elapsed since the affair at the Punch-Bowl to send for an expert detective. They thought of this, and it was not strange that Gurdon moved nervously.

"He must have some motive," Olive persisted.

"I will demand to know it, at once!" Forrest declared.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BANSHEE'S WARNING.

THE miner made a movement to carry out his threat, but Olive hurriedly checked him.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. "For your life, don't do it!"

"Am I to have that reptile hanging on my track?" demanded Gurdon, warmly.

"Be prudent! Thus far he has been given no evidence that we have observed him. Do you not see you are far safer if you keep your secret than if you reveal your suspicions to him?"

"You are right. Your way is best, and I will be duly prudent. I will match his cunning with cunning—if I can!"

Still avoiding any look or motion which might betray them, the young people watched the supposed spy covertly.

He was a man of middle age, and of tall and slender build. Seen at a distance, there was something almost ministerial in his appearance. He wore a long black coat which was buttoned around his person tightly, and his hat was extremely grave and subdued of form, as it were.

He had very black hair, and a face clean-shaven except for two short lines of beard by his ears.

"I hate that man, already!" Gurdon exclaimed.

"Don't let him know it!" quickly cautioned Olive.

"You are right; I must be prudent."

"He may not be after you."

"Then why has he business where I go? I am not superstitious, as a rule, but I confess to a feeling that he is on my track, even without knowing a thing of the man. If that is so, I wish he was of different build; I don't like such a human crow."

"Forewarned is forearmed. Be prudent, and no harm may come of it. He is more than human, he he like crow or peacock. But don't be rash!"

"I thank you for your good will, and I will try to prove as prudent as you could wish."

Olive felt she could not help Forrest by remaining there, so she soon left him and went her way. Gurdon watched her in thoughtful mood.

"She is a friend well worth having. Why didn't I confide in her wholly? I am sure it would have been safe, for she is not influenced by the clouds which have risen around me, of late. A good friend; a noble friend! Surely, I can trust her. Yet, she is Thomas Hammond's niece, and it may be well not to presume too far on her kindness. Now, what about my crow spy?"

He took a secret glance at the man in black. The latter was still near, but apparently engaged in surveying the heavens, only.

"I'll test him!" Gurdon decided, and forthwith moved toward the stranger; but the latter did not wait for him.

Something on the upper hills seemed suddenly to interest him, and he went on at a slow but sure pace which took him out of the reach of immediate discovery. Gurdon did not care to chase him, so he gave it up and went past the point.

His course was toward the vicinity of the Punch-Bowl, and he kept going until that scene dawned upon his vision. There it was that the notorious robbery had taken place, but no sign of the deed remained. Instead, an air of peace and quiet security was given the locality by the tent of the Banshee.

Brown Bet had come to be a feature of Sabara life. The movement to force her to move on had never taken form, and she was almost forgotten in the rush of events which seemed more important.

The miner saw no sign of her until within a few feet of the tent, when she suddenly emerged from cover. She shook a long, bony finger at him.

"I have been looking for you!" she abruptly announced.

"For me?"

"That's what I said."

"Why should you look for me?"

"Because I knew you would come when the eagles began their work!"

"So you have not forgotten your prophecy?"

"No. Have you?"

"Hardly that, but I am not a believer in the melancholy fate you allotted to me."

"Hail wait until the eagles get at your plumage; then see if you mock at the Dream-Oracle's far-sight!"

"Do you get your far-sight from known worldly things?"

"I got it from your own dream, and nothing else. Don't sneer too soon! I tell you your head shall be bowed low, and you will cry for help when only the pitiless rocks will hear. Beware, beware! Man and woman will desert you, but your crimes will not be stilled. You will weep, and the rocks will laugh at your weak complaint! Hail the eagles will have you yet!"

Practical as he was, Gurdon could not help being influenced by this dismal prophecy. It lost nothing in the delivery, for the Banshee had an air befitting her calling. She was very witch-like in looks and speech, and shivers were pardonable when she spoke.

"Good woman," he managed to answer, "can't you ward off this peril?"

"Why should I?"

"You have done me one good turn."

"Sorry was I to do it! Ill did you deserve it! Get you to a better frame of mind, or you will find no one to stand by you when you need help. I like not your way!"

"I am very glad you were by the tree when I stopped there to light my cigar."

"The devil's weed, and only the devil's children would smoke it!"

"Were you near enough to get a sniff of the cigar?"

"Young man, you and your cigars concern me not. What is such nonsense to me? One thing I can say, though—you will smoke with more cause when the days go by!"

"You talk in riddles."

"Watch the unfolding of the prediction!"

"Friend, you give me a dark outlook, but I blame you not. Instead, I owe you too much to quarrel. Let us be at peace. I am very grateful for your help, and would be glad of your friendship in the future. I see in you a woman of sagacity not be held in this world except at long intervals. Such a friend is a friend, indeed."

"What favor do you want?" the Banshee abruptly asked.

"Favor?"

"Ay! We flatter only to gain our own selfish ends. You have an ax to grind, my trans-

parent sir! Nevertheless, I will not repulse you. I'll do you a good turn, and then may you go and hang yourself. You had as well, since you'll come to that, anyhow!"

"I am much obliged, but am not in a suicidal mood. Yet, I shall be glad to listen to you."

"A certain man is in your track. He is innocent to look at. So is the sleeping tiger. The man seeks you; he watches from ambush; he opens wide his eye and seeks whom he may devour."

"Who is this man?"

"Be prudent, and I will show him to you. Do it secretly, but turn your gaze toward the top of yonder cliff. Gently, my mad young sir; most gently, now!"

With a well-defined suspicion in his mind Gurdon obeyed the command. He looked, and then he needed no immediate information. The ministerial-looking person was there.

He stood near the top of the cliff, and his head was so turned that he could watch what was going on below.

"He looks the parson," added the Banshee, "yet I assure you he is not there to deliver a sermon to rocks and stones."

"Who is he?" Gurdon asked, in a subdued voice, not a little awed.

"By name, Julius Cohen; by present residence, a guest of Daniel Wayland; by repute, Wayland's friend!"

"If I understand you aright, you mean that he has come here and is stopping at Wayland's."

"So I said."

"Why do you say of this man that he is my enemy? Why should he be? Have I done anything to deserve his ill-will?"

"It's a wise man who knows his own weaknesses. I know not yours."

"But you made a direct statement that he was 'on my track'; that he was watching me from ambush. Will you explain this? What does he seek to do?"

"A mad young man like you deserves some patience, I suppose. I do not know what this man wants. He is at Wayland's simply as a guest. You and I are not foolish enough to believe this of one who goes mooning about like him. He follows you! Why? Why, unless he has you marked for slaughter? I see what I see, and draw inferences from it; no more. I put no faith in him. That's all!"

"Madam, I thank you. This man must have his reasons, but I am forewarned. Yes, and warned by you! I thank you. More than that, I respectfully request your friendship in the future. I ask for no better ally."

The Banshee leaned upon her staff and studied the speaker's face. Her little, but keen eyes became interrogation points which seemed to pierce him.

"You may not be so bad as you look," she confessed. "I am sorry I had to prophesy so ill of you."

"Perhaps I may be saved, yet."

"No! The voice of the dream has been heard; there is no such thing as advancing backward. You have listened to the truth. The eagles seek you; they will devour you; you are in the toils. There is no escape. You are doomed, doomed, doomed!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

INVITED TO SLAY.

"ENOUGH! enough!" Gurdon exclaimed. "Don't kill me before my time comes!"

He could not avoid the speech. The Banshee's utterance was dismal and weird, and though he was not a believer in things supernatural, he now had the proof of danger before him in the form of the man on the cliff. He did not doubt that he was looking at a detective sent to hunt down the road-agents of Punch-Bowl.

"I'll not kill you, my bold lad!" Bet returned. "Your future is black enough without any help from me. I do believe I am getting to like your way. Mayhap, I can help you later on."

"Friend, if you can do it I'll reward you to the extent of my ability. Why it is I can't say, but I have an idea you are the strongest friend I could have in all Sabara. You have two sharp eyes. Use them for my good, and bring me all the news you get, and whatever I can do for you, you may rely upon me to do with zeal."

"You talk it bravely, and I'll take you at your word. Remember, the old bag of the bills is watching over you. Now, get thee gone, and as you go I'll fling after thee maledictions enough to sink a ship with sin. Get thee gone, I say!"

She shook her staff at him, and he caught on to the spirit of the plan and moved away.

The Banshee kept her word and pretended to be in a rage over some matter. She shrilly abused him, and once he stopped to make a derisive gesture to add to the impression they were trying to convey. Thus he went down the trail. When he took a last secret glance he saw Julius Cohen still on the cliff, but he was careful not to betray his knowledge of the fellow's proximity.

"I am in deep waters," thought the miner. "I hardly know how I stand. It seems Olive suspects my share in the affair at the Punch-Bowl, and if the Banshee does not, appearances are very deceptive. Who will suspect next? This shadower must have the idea in his head that I am worth investigating, but I hardly be-

lieve he can have the clew, as yet. Now, I have a good deal of faith in Olive, if she's Hammond's niece; and Brown Bet impresses me well, but Julius Cohen—ah! he's a bird of different plumage. I've got to look out for him!"

Thoughtfully Gurdon went on; so thoughtfully that he failed to see he was to have another encounter until he almost ran upon another person. Then he looked up suddenly.

Mrs. Pearl Hammond was there.

Now, as has been indicated before, there had been no good will between these two persons. Mrs. Pearl had worn fine clothes and diamonds when her neighbors were going hungry, and she had always disdained the neighbors, simply because they were poor and humble.

This had not pleased Gurdon, and in his fiery days, before he had formed the plan which led to the affair at the Punch-Bowl, he had once taken her to task boldly.

For this she had always hated him, and for many days they had not even spoken. When the fair Pearl passed Forrest, she did it with her head so elevated that she never had seemed to see him at all.

Such being the case he did not expect recognition, now, and great was his surprise when she bowed and smiled sweetly.

"How do you do, Mr. Forrest?" she greeted.

Gurdon became wary in a moment. Was this another trap? Did the foe think to snare him with so feeble a bait?

Willing to see just what was marked out, he answered with politeness, whereupon she added:

"You and I have not met much, of late."

"That is a fact."

"We are all busy at this lively camp—at least, I am, and I dare say it is the same with you."

"It is."

"Hard work is good for one, it is said."

"Correctly, no doubt."

Pearl was as smiling as if she had met her best friend, and Gurdon choked down his dislike and gave her all the encouragement he could command. In this doubly insincere state the farce went on for some time. He was determined that nothing should make him commit any indiscretion until she saw fit to unmask her batteries, as it were.

Anon, she broke the ice with a gloved hand.

"You have been to the hills, I see. I am not sure that is a safe resort, now."

"Why not?"

"You forget the road-agent of the Punch-Bowl."

Gurdon grew freshly wary.

"He may be well away, by this time."

"Or, he may be within hearing of our voices," suggested Mrs. Pearl, sweetly.

"I, at least, offer no inducement to his purloining hand."

Pearl laughed merrily.

"I should presume not. One does not rob himself!"

"Pardon me; I fail to catch the spirit of the joke."

"It is very simple. Mr. Forrest, when the wise men of Sahara met to consider who had run away with the Punch-Bowl train, there was one person who might have testified, but who preferred to remain silent. It was I. Now, if I had talked, I could have made it very unpleasant for you, but I preferred to remain silent. I do not like to see men brought to grief."

"I understand less than ever," remarked Gurdon, looking at Mrs. Pearl sharply.

"I think I can make my meaning clear. You see, I was aware that it was you who robbed the train at the Punch-Bowl!"

Gurdon was staggered. He tried to be calm, but the statement had been sprung on him too suddenly for his composure to be what he would have preferred. He managed to laugh, but was not sure it was a natural laugh in sound. If so, it was in no other way.

"You are a joker, I see," he remarked.

"On the contrary, I am not. I rarely jest; now, I certainly am not thus occupied. Hear me, Mr. Forrest: The night of the robbery I saw you and another man in the camp. You were in close and earnest conversation. I did not then suppose I had any interest in your talk, and I gave it only passing heed. Yet, I heard enough so that when the story of the robbery was made public I knew you were one of the men who did the great act!"

Her manner had grown serious, and Gurdon was correspondingly ill at ease. He answered:

"I cannot believe you in earnest, but if you are, I beg leave to assure you I am not guilty, as you seem to think."

"Let us see. One word of yours to your companion comes back to my mind distinctly. Said you: 'Remember, it's to-night at the Punch-Bowl! Fail not, and come well armed!' Now, Mr. Forrest, do you call that nothing?"

The miner was staggered. He vaguely remembered using just these words to Puyallup Peter, and their utterance, now, was a startler.

"You were mistaken in the men, if you really heard aught of the kind," he persisted.

"Will you not give me credit for common sense?" and the lady betrayed impatience. "I am no idle jester, and I could not have quoted you unless I had heard what I state. Remember that! Now, I am not here as your enemy."

Your secret has been mine all these days. Is not the fact that I have said nothing the best possible proof that I am not disposed to do so? Mr. Forrest, I think we may be useful to each other. I have something to do, too!"

"What?"

"I want a man removed!"

"Removed!" echoed Gurdon, nervously.

"Yes. I suppose we all have our enemies; I know I have mine. If you will take care of him, I will be your faithful ally. I speak boldly, you see. I feel I can trust you. Now, all nonsense aside, you and I have not been friends in the past, but why should that affect the present and future? Self Preservation in the first law of nature. We can help one another. Why should we not?"

"Who is your enemy?"

Mrs. Pearl's eyes glittered strangely.

"Who, except Spokane Saul?"

"You amaze me! That good man?"

"Good!" hissed Mrs. Pearl. "He is the biggest rascal in all Sahara!"

"Report is not to that effect."

"Simply because others do not know him as I do. I am tired of all this talk about Spokane Saul and his many saint-like qualities. I tell you there is no one in this town more ready to do work of villainy when he has anything to gain by it than this same Samaritan. He is a most colossal fraud; his goodness is a sham; he is a low, mean, scheming vagabond! Oh, I know him well! Don't talk to me about his wonderful ways. He is wonderful only as a hypocrite!"

There was intense passion in her voice, and her manner confirmed all her words conveyed. If he had not been so prepared for suspicion, Gurdon would have thought her wholly sincere.

As it was, he remained cautious.

"This comes sudden," he answered. "I know not what to think, for that a flaw has been found in Spokane Saul is amazing. Is your opinion now generally felt by all?"

"Did I not tell you I was the only one who thought this? I tried to say so, but if I failed, it is not strange. I am excited, now. Yes, excited, but all in earnest. To you, only, have I spoken plainly. Now, will you help me to remove my enemy?"

CHAPTER XXV.

A RED COMMISSION.

THE miner gazed at Mrs. Pearl in wonder. He was ready to believe almost anything of her, in one sense, but he was surprised now. He remained silent so long that she impatiently added:

"Will you remove Spokane Saul?"

"What do you mean by remove?" Gurdon slowly asked.

"I mean, kill him!"

Mrs. Pearl hissed the words in a way which made the miner feel curious thrills run up and down his spinal column. Then she impulsively grasped him by the arm.

"Let us have no nonsense!" she added. "I am not an angel of light, and don't pretend to be. I am a woman who is capable of saving herself at any cost when driven to the wall. Spokane Saul has made himself my enemy, my persecutor. For that he must die! Yes, die like the dog he is! Is it my fault? No, no; he saw fit to make war upon me; to persecute a woman. If he gets the worst of it, who is to blame but himself, I say? He shall die!"

She seemed to have a fondness for reiteration. Pausing for a moment only, she continued:

"Now, you know my secret. I, also, know yours. We are situated alike. More importantly, we can act alike—act to each other's good. Gurdon Forrest, I see in you a bold man, and for that kind I have a liking. You are poor. Slay Spokane Saul for me, and I will make you rich! Do you hear? Rich! Fancy it! Rich!"

She clung to the word and the idea as if it were a foregone conclusion that any one would steep his hands in sin for the sake of riches, and it began to dawn upon Gurdon that there was a vast amount of mischief and danger in her. She spoke of murder with the utmost coolness, and as if it was an every-day affair.

He tried to be wily.

"May I ask in what way Spokane Saul has made himself so obnoxious to you?"

"That I can't tell, and it is not at all necessary I should. The point at issue is, will you do the work?"

"Do I really understand that you want the Samaritan killed?"

"Well, if you don't, you ought to. I have tried hard enough to be clear on the point. Yes, I want him killed. That's what I mean by removing him. Am I plain?"

"You are, but I confess I don't covet the job."

"He is one of those who will make it hot for you if your connection with the Punch-Bowl work is made known publicly."

"I have not confessed any connection with that matter."

"Naturally. You would be foolish if you did confess. Be as prudent as you please; it is all the more a proof that I have not made any error in seeking your aid in this case. I like your way. We will hold each other's secrets fast. If

we are true to the trust, neither of us will suffer."

She spoke with easy confidence, but Gurdon was not in like mood. He did not see how he was to answer so she would not take offense, alarm or distrust. She helped him out of the dilemma herself.

"Of course you want time to decide on this, and I am not inclined to rush you. We will let it rest for now. In a day or two I will see you again. It is to your credit that you have not asked what I will pay for having Spokane Saul removed, for it shows you are not all bound up in what you can make out of it. Nevertheless, I will pay you well. Rest assured of that. Tom Hammond has money, and I know how to use it to the best advantage. Trust me for that! And now I will bid you good-day. Guard our mutual secrets, and we will come out victors. Good-day!"

Speaking earnestly, the foremost lady of Sahara went her way. She left Gurdon in a strange state of mind.

"Well, that's the first time I ever was taken for a murderer!" he murmured in amazement.

Mrs. Pearl was tripping airily away. Her movements would indicate a mind wholly at ease, and all things went to show how desperate a woman she was really.

"Never once thought to ask me if I believed in assassination!" added the miner, almost in a mood of levity, but soberer thoughts soon came to him.

He saw how threatening the future looked. No longer did he ask if Mrs. Pearl was in earnest. He did not doubt that. She meant it all, and relied upon him to do the deed of murder she had planned.

"I ought never to have attacked the train at the Punch-Bowl!" was his decision. "Nobody ever had purer motives, but I have learned that nothing can justify illegal methods. The law should be obeyed at all times. I am reaping the consequences of taking the law into my own hands. Where will it end?"

It was a pregnant question.

The outlook was dark.

After awhile the miner walked toward the center of the camp. Julius Cohn had disappeared but that he was not out of the case Gurdon soon had cause to know. He stopped for a time at Damon's, and when he had been there awhile Julius put in an appearance. He came with a very soft tread, and made a plausible excuse by inquiring about local matters of Damon.

In so doing he did not once look directly at Forrest, but the latter was not deceived.

Julius did not improve on closer view.

He had a thin, dried-up face, the expression of which was cat-like, though the comparison was not just to that faithful feline. The small eyes in Julius's head were strikingly sharp, and restless and furtive in character.

He spoke in a low voice, and when he walked it was as gingerly as if he was treading on eggs.

Altogether, he was a very offensive person, Gurdon thought. Such a man he would not have trusted in any ordinary walk of life, while, now, he became more than ever repulsive. That he was a shrewd rascal the miner was certain. It was evident in every way.

Nobody likes to have a man-hunter on his track, and Gurdon experienced all the perturbation of an honest man thus beset. From that time there would be no rest for him. Wherever he might go he would be under the espionage of the spy. His smallest and largest secrets would alike be reached out for by him, and if the whole truth did not come out it would be a wonder.

"You have a very pleasant town, Mr. Damon," said Julius, softly.

"It's a dandy!" declared Damon.

"My friend Wayland tells me it is not paying as well as could be wished."

"Not now, but we will come to it, yet."

"I wish I had the strength to work with you. I am here for my health," and Julius sighed.

"Not well, eh?"

"No. I am bookkeeper in a dry-goods house in Denver, and injured my health by too close application to work. My old friend Wayland invited me to come here and recuperate, so I jumped at the chance. I hope to return home a new man."

"This is the place to do it."

"I hope so. It is a dreadful thing to be out of health!"

Julius sighed again, and Gurdon felt like taking by him the neck and flinging him out of the room. How he hated the fellow, already!

Julius talked on, and tried to make his position more invulnerable, it seemed. Once or twice he coughed in a consumptive way, and yet his strength seemed to hold good after his long walk over the hills.

Gurdon left the room. He expected to be followed, but the spy was not so foolish as that. The miner saw him no more for some time. In the hour which followed, however, he was not long in-doors for one so debilitated. He was to be seen when least expected, going about the town with his soft tread and skulking manner.

There was no cause to doubt all that had been suspected of him. That he had Gurdon especial-

ly marked was not certain, but the latter did not for a moment doubt it.

Puyallup Peter came to Gurdon later in the day.

"I've got a message from the Banshee," he announced.

"What of her?"

"She says Julius has been mousin' along the range trail, an' she reckons he was lookin' fer signs o' the treasure we didn't get, that night."

"He may find it. If he does, he will be in better luck than we are. It is strange what became of that wagon-load."

"Hinch and Moses had the stuff there; you kin bet high on that. Wal, they ei her saved it, or some other robber stepped in an' gobbled the stuff. I now think it was the latter."

"I never have doubted it. There was a factor in the case not known to us. Some one got the gold."

"Yes; but let me tell yer. I hev been up the trail—that's the way I see the Banshee—an' by the way I found a bit of baggin'. It was just the same stuff I got a glimpse on, when we was sailin' inter Hinch an' Moses. What I see was ketched onto some rocks, as ef it had hung thar after bein' throwed out of the wagon by somebody."

"Now you interest me. The wagon came back empty. If it had any treasure in it at all, it must have been put out by the way. Can it be it is now concealed near the spot?"

"Jest my riddle!"

"It may pay us to look into it."

"An' still you hit me forcible. What d'ye say ter lookin' fer it? I reckon we kin dodge old Jule while we take a squint. Is it a go?"

"I am with you; we will try it!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

TROUBLE BY NIGHT.

"Hyer we be!"

Midnight had come, and Gurdon and Puyallup Peter were at the point where the range trail led up the rocky way where the robbed train had gone only to meet the robbers. Somewhat beyond was the tent of the Banshee, but that did not interest the two men who had gone to the vicinity, except as they might manage to avoid it and the Banshee.

"This is where I see the stuff ketched on the rocks," added Peter. "It is our starter. What kin we build up from it?"

The question was superfluous, for they had already decided that the one hope was to search diligently among the rocks. This they proceeded to do.

At no time could they feel they were safe from discovery. They had taken every precaution to avoid notice, but the ferret-eyed Julius haunted them in mind, if not in reality. He was liable to appear on the scene at any time.

It was with thoughts like these they went about the task.

How much gold, if any, Hinch and Moses had carried on the eventful night, the searchers did not know; but if any great quantity, it could not be carried far away in the haste under which the second party of robbers must have labored. The question was, had it since been carried off, or was it near at hand?

They knew the place well, and began the work in due form.

Each recess was carefully looked to.

"Eh's durned dark!" grumbled Peter. "I don't see why they can't let us fellers alone until we do the job up with some gentility. We wouldn't run away with their old treasure, b'durn!"

"We are fighting the multitude, and must take the consequences."

"I prefer ter take the cash. Yeller dust is the burden o' my song, an' my voice never was sweeter, but they think it's the howl of a wolf, b'durn!"

Going on systematically, the two men gave the recesses close attention. The robbers must have concealed their plunder in some haste. It must be near, unless they had improved the chance to get it further away since. But where?

An hour passed in the work. Various experiments had been tried, but the treasure was not yet theirs. No sign of it had been seen. Recesses were common, and this made it all the more difficult, as it delayed the work.

"We ought ter gone ter the Banshee, an' had her dream it out," suggested Puyallup.

"She is a person to be trusted when we know she is all right. Her gift of far-sight is, of course, a humbug. Whether she has a friendly feeling for us is an open question. I would not trust her here, even if my inclination is to believe in her."

"She wouldn't know us from Adam now. With these masks on I feel like a cross between an Egyptian mummy an' a cannibal chief."

Peter pulled at the rough cover which hid all his head. However he felt, he and Gurdon did make a lawless appearance. Their purpose was achieved, though, for it would have been hard to tell whether they were black or white.

They were moving on when the rattling of a stone drew their attention more sharply to the front. They looked, and a shock fell upon them. There stood a human figure.

"B'durn!" muttered Puyallup, blankly.

The figure was not easy to analyze. It was in a place where the light fell but dimly, and only the outline of the person could be seen. Whether it was that of a man or woman they were not prepared to say, and they gained no light from the person. Like themselves, the unknown simply stood and looked.

They were not so placed as to consult, but it occurred to Gurdon that bold action was not more risky than retreat, so he took a forward step. He was quickly checked.

"Stop!" commanded a harsh voice.

"Well," retorted the miner, "and who are you?"

"I am one who defends this way!"

"Defends it from what?"

"From you!"

"I am not aware that it needs any such defense. Besides, what is to be defended?"

"It matters not. Let it suffice that you are not to come any further."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I am."

Gurdon gazed in silence. He had been trying to get some light as to what they had to deal with, but without success. The figure kept up its secrecy. The form seemed to be muffled in a mysterious way, and the voice was so well pitched that he could not tell anything more than he had seen at first glance. Puyallup grew combative on hearing the decision announced by the unknown.

"See here!" he exclaimed, "what fer a parcel o' jays do yer take us ter be? Sence when did these mountains git ter be private property? I hev always come an' gone ter suit myself, an' I jest about reckon I shall keep it up!"

"You are wrong! There is no passage here. Turn back!"

The unknown waved a hand tragically.

"We won't do it!" retorted Peter. "No bluff won't work here, b'durn! We are goin' straight ahead. Ketch on?"

"You will come no further!" was the unmoved answer.

"Upon what plea do you dispute our passage?" Gurdon asked.

"The right of might. You are not wanted here. For the last time, turn back!"

It was a plain warning, but it was not heeded. Curiosity, if no more, would have led the adventurers on, then. Gurdon suddenly pressed forward. Then a deep growl broke upon his ears, and thus guided he saw another and larger form in the path.

"A grizzly!" calmly announced the unknown.

"An animal tame to none but me, but ready to spring at your throats like a flash, at my bidding. Keep off, or die!"

"Durn the b'ar!" muttered Puyallup.

Gurdon was silent. He had not been used to seeing tame bears in mountains, and the fact that, though he could see a dark form, there was no perceptible motion to it, gave him the suspicion that the present animal was not what it seemed. Its form was so shrouded in darkness that he could not tell whether it was bear or hyena, and he had a suspicion that it might be neither.

"Stranger," he remarked, "we never have had any trouble with your animal, and we are not afraid of him."

So saying, he advanced warily. The bear evidently forgot to growl, but the figure behind it took on an aggressive air.

"Stop!" was again the order. "Keep off, or you are dead men!"

Then other voices broke in on their interview.

"Hallo! what hev we here? We ain't out alone, pard. Let's hev a talk with our neighbors, an' see if we are all off one piece. How goes it, old fellers?"

And two men came out of the darkness and paused between the parties already on the scene.

Gurdon's first idea was that matters were getting too warm for them, but the lull with the unknown led to a new belief. There was no welcome. Did not this indicate that the last comers were not welcome, in reality?

"Glad ter see ye all," went on the last speaker.

"Yes, we're glad ter see ye. Don't know ye from John Smith, but I reckon we shall get better acquainted. Gents, we want a loan. How is it?—will you put up the stuff an' fill our pockets with the shiners? In plain words, we are bloody robbers. Will you shell out? It's shell or die! See?"

Acting in concert, the new-comers quickly menaced those who had been there before, with revolvers which certainly were real.

"Cash over or die!" repeated the spokesman.

"You go an' hang yerself!" retorted Puyallup, defiantly. "Ef you are jokin' you—"

"We are in earnest!"

"Then you've come ter the wrong shop, b'durn!" Cash over? I'll see you in Arizony first. Ef you say cash ter me, out goes yer lamps. No miser'ble thief kin come bis games on me."

"Pard, I reckon we've got ter do them up," suggested the men. "Out with yer barkers an' give them solid lead. Fire!"

They flourished revolvers, but their slowness in using them gave time for Gurdon and Peter to prepare in like manner. The rival parties

confronted each other belligerently, while the first unknown was almost forgotten.

"We'll let ye live ef you will deserve it," proceeded the robber. "All we want is yer cash. Fork over!"

Gurdon saw a movement behind them. Still another person was near. Who, and what would be his stand?

The question was soon answered. There was a sudden leap, and the last man was among the robbers. He struck out right and left, and his blows were heavy. The robbers certainly felt the consequences. Yet they stood up bravely, and it was blow for blow.

Gurdon did not know a person in the fight, or have any means of knowing where his sympathies ought to go, but he could not remain idle at such a moment.

He had taken one forward step, but the first unknown was ahead of him. With a long bound that person went into the thick of the fight, and gave battle in a zealous way.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PLACE OF TREASURE.

PUYALLUP PETER caught Gurdon by the arm. "This ain't none of our funeral!" he exclaimed. "Let 'em fight it out, while we take a run fer our health."

The advice was good. Both parties had threatened our friends, and there was no visible reason why they should remain and risk further trouble when secrecy was so essential to their purposes. So Gurdon reasoned, and he quickly acquiesced in the suggestion.

"Come on!" he answered, and he and Peter ran up the slope beyond them.

It was their intention to pause at a safe distance, but before they were ready to turn they heard sounds in the rear which caused them to look back.

"Hullo! somebody else is in it!" Peter exclaimed.

Others were scrambling up the ascent, and it was not hard to see they must be the defeated portion of the late combatants, as that fight was already over.

"I ain't goin' a rod further!" declared Puyallup. "I ain't built right ter run from danger. I'll stand my ground, an' ef they want any racket, they'll find me ready fer the go!"

Gurdon did not imagine any fight would follow the coming, and he was not reluctant to watch events move on. They stopped, but the other climbers did not act according to the programme.

"Durn it!" shouted one, "here's somebody we kin lick, anyhow! Sail in an' make the fur fly!"

And they came at our friends with a fierce rush.

Gladly would the latter have avoided the meeting, but they had no choice. It was simply a matter of taking to ignominious flight or defending themselves from undeserved attack. In such a case they were not the ones to consent to be victimized.

They stood firm and received the rush.

"Whoop!" yelled Peter; "this is stirrin' to the blood! Wade in an' cut yer bigness!"

It was doubtful if the valiant speaker knew just what he was talking about, but he knew how to act. The two parties met, and the clash of weapons rung on the air. Blow was given for blow, and the defenders yielded not an inch.

"Cut an' slay!" commanded Puyallup. "Leave not yer man fer the sun ter shine on! Climb all over him!"

It was a sanguinary order for a peaceful person, but Peter knew how to act as well as talk, and in this he was not a whit ahead of Gurdon.

In a few minutes the assailants were shown they had met the wrong party. They began to give ground. Foot by foot they had to retreat. Their own efforts grew weaker. They wavered, hesitated, fled.

"Let them go!" directed Gurdon. "I know not whom we have found, but we want no man's blood on our hands. Let them go!"

"You're boss an' your orders end the muss, but I'd ruther had a few scalps ter carry home on my war-hoss. Still, there's been a pile o' fun!"

Puyallup fanned himself vigorously with his hat and watched the retreat of the foe. They made no delay in getting out of sight. In a short time darkness concealed them from view.

"Sahara is gettin' ter be a lively town!" quoth Peter.

"I don't know what to think of this matter," Forrest confessed, soberly. "I fail to see any sign of Sahara men in the gang. They were not like our Swedes, and certainly were not Hammond or any of his fellow conspirators. What does it mean?"

"Strangers are driftin' in by the by-ways an' hedges. Soon we'll hev a big crop, an' then it will be nothin' but one constant fight fer gold, glory an' gore!"

Peter talked wildly. He was a peaceable and worthy citizen, but war had stirred up his blood.

"And the first persons we met down below? Puyallup, I am not inclined to let this go uninvestigated. We may find something there which will help us on. Let's go down again—a

risky work, perhaps, a foolish one, possibly; but one we want to stake something on. Come!"

Peter was not reluctant, and they hurried down the ridge.

As they approached the spot of action they became prudent, but not a thing or person could they see.

"I'm afraid we're too late," Gurdon remarked.

"If we be, I'll eat panther for luck, fer a week ter come!"

Nearer yet, and then the younger man went on alone. He advanced with every sense on the alert. He might have spared the trouble. No one was to be seen. Convinced they had nobody to meet, he called to his aid. Then they soon made sure on the point.

"Dumped, b'durn!" Puyallup muttered.

"Have we been outwitted? Was the second attack only a blind to get us away from the place? But no; I am sure that was not it. The trouble between them was too realistic for a pretense."

"Right! They was in dead earnest. What hev they left?"

"Light up!" Gurdon returned, abruptly.

Peter had brought a small lantern, and though they were well aware that danger would attend any showing of the light, they were disposed to risk it. The lantern had fallen to the ground in the fight, but was not injured. It was soon blazing. Then they surveyed the scene.

At first nothing was to be seen, but the question soon arose, what had been guarded so firmly by their first acquaintance? Back in the recess they went, and there they found a place of unexpected size. Nature had guarded it so well that if one had passed by without his suspicions being aroused he would not have seen aught of the den now discovered. It was a miniature cave.

The obstinate defense at the start had prepared the searchers for fresh work, but the recess was deserted.

"Yes, an' what's more," grumbled Puyallup, "there ain't nothin' else hyer. Why did the critter dispute our passage?"

Gurdon did not reply, but held the lantern close to the rocky floor and walked around. Then he straightened up.

"Peter, there has been more than men, here!"

"Your voice sounds queer. What else has been on the spot?"

"Look!"

"B'durn!"

Peter spoke in a hushed voice. Then he looked up with his eyes several sizes larger than usual.

"Say, what do ye make of it?"

"Answer that, yourself."

"I see the ground has been a good deal stirred up by the draggin' of something over it. Then I see bits o' stuff clingin' ter the p'int's o' stone that look like baggin'! Baggin', b'durn!"

Peter hung to the word tenaciously. Presently he added:

"I catch your idee, comrade. I see'd baggin' in the trail where I claim the treasure was unloaded from the wagon when Hinch an' Moses lost the stuff. You think we hev found—"

"The place where the treasure was concealed!"

"Wal, it ain't hyer no longer."

"You speak only too truly. It is gone, yet how long? Why did our fellow-wanderers of the hills defend the place so stoutly?"

"Ruin, destruction, chaos an' other things! I'll be darned ef I don't think we jest missed them! They was almost caught in the act!"

"Right, Puyallup; right! This night they have been shifting the treasure. I should say, from what has happened, we were within a fraction of catching them at the labor. It would be no wild prophecy to guess that they were just about to take the last load from the place. With most execrable luck, we have failed in the moment of success, as I may put it."

Neither was cheerful, then. They abandoned words to look the den over. Although they found no positively new evidence, there was much to confirm their theories.

Both were firm in their belief that the lost treasure had been concealed there for a time.

They consulted, and ended by starting out on a new trip for evidence. It might not yet be too late to get some trace of the robbers. So they thought at the time, but when they had gone over the vicinity and found nothing the hope disappeared. They were utterly beaten.

The matter was exasperating. Although they had made no error of judgment, since they did not at any time have the clew to the case, it was a mis- so close that it hit hard.

"We are now left to face the fact that we did have rivals on the night of the Punch-Bowl affair," observed Gurdon. "Beyond doubt, Hinch and Moses had treasure with them. We tried to get it and failed. At just the right time the unknowns stepped in and secured the plunder. No doubt they intercepted the wagon on its way to the camp. The gold was taken out, and the team then allowed to proceed on its way. Said gold has been secreted here. Where is it, now?"

Puyallup shook his head.

"I suppose the most important question is, can we find it again?" proceeded the miner. "Un-

fortunately, we can't search as we could if we were free from Julius Cohen and his evil eyes. We must work secretly. Can we do anything under such circumstances?"

"We might walk over Julius's collar a few times," growled Peter. "Sometimes I'm sorry I was learnt ter be a good little kid when I was of spankin' age—I be, b'durn! Ef it wa'n't fer that I should know about how ter deal with the measly critters. I may find a way, yet!"

"There must be no violence, Peter. If we turned robbers once, it was in a good cause. We must not work in a bad one, now."

Puyallup shook his head and said nothing.

There was no more to be done that night, so they took their course back to their quarters. No one was seen by the way.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TROUBLE AT HAMMOND'S.

MRS. PEARL stood by her window, looking out over the camp.

She had not been abroad so much as usual, of late, and as she disdained part in the pretty gossip of Sabara, even as she disdained all things relating to the camp, she knew less of what was going on than the average person.

Below, Thomas Hammond was engaged in some trivial duty. She was vaguely aware of this, but gave it little heed.

Down the street came a man. He walked with a slow and stealthy step, and his every way was furtive. He was in his natural form, for this was Julius Cohen.

Pearl did not see him. She was deep in thought, and if she looked away over the village it was not with seeing eyes, really. Nearer came Julius. He cast a secret glance toward the house. The glance took in Thomas, but he pretended not to see him. Julius was playing a sly game at Sabara.

He arrived exactly opposite the window where the charming Mrs. Pearl stood. She looked down and saw him. Then the dull expression suddenly disappeared from her face. Her eyes lighted up; her countenance told a striking story; her color faded. She gazed like one overwhelmed with calamity. As the power of motion returned to her she abruptly sprang back from the window. Her hand was pressed to her heart.

"He here!" she gasped. "He here!"

It was all she seemed capable of saying. Yet, there was a multitude of thought in her mind.

Stirring again, she moved quickly to the window. Julius was still in sight, but receding.

"Yes," she murmured, "it is he! There is no mistake; there can be none. It is he. Why is he here?—why? Is fate bound to crush me? First Spokane Saul learns my secret, and now comes this man, my still bitterer enemy. Why is he here?—why, why?"

Her voice was almost a wail. She trembled and was pale as death. Julius walked on in apparent unconsciousness of the tumult he had caused. But Mrs. Pearl staggered back to a chair.

"I am ruined!" she gasped.

She covered her face with her hands and seemed to lose consciousness.

Below, Thomas Hammond thought of something to do in the house. He turned and entered, and in so doing almost fell over Patience Jones.

"Now, Patience apparently had a good heart, but she was indifferent to her personal appearance. She had no good clothes, and did not even have ambition to look neat. Olive had done her best to overcome this failing, but she could not at all times have an eye to the child, and as a consequence, Patience was more often slovenly than clean. This had been noticed by Thomas; it had exasperated him, too. And as he now entered, there was Patience in his way, slipshod as usual, and a disgrace to his house, as he regarded it.

He looked at her with a lowering brow.

"See here, girl!" he exclaimed, "when did you wash your face last?"

Patience grinned.

"Law, sir, I don't know. I try not to wash it too much!"

"I should say you do try; I should, by Jove! Nothing but deliberate intention can keep any one as slovenly as you are. This has got to be stopped. Do you hear?"

"Yes," replied Patience, grinning.

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing? Do you mean you are going around here like a monument of dirt?"

"I guess I'm boss of my own face!" retorted Patience, aggrieved.

"And you intend to keep it as it is, do you?"

"Yes!"

Patience was not aware that she was acting the rebel, in the full sense. She smiled at Thomas, and only persisted because she regarded it as her sovereign right to do so. That she was deliberately setting up her will in opposition to his, did not once enter her darkened mind.

"We will see!"

Thomas was too proud to make many words with one he regarded as no more than the dust under his feet. With the last exclamation he marched past her and sought his wife's room. If

he had been in an observing mood, he would have seen something was wrong there, but he was full of his own ideas.

"Mrs. Hammond," he began, abruptly, "I am going to have a clearing out here!"

She had been able to summon a measure of calmness only with a powerful effort, and now would have given much to have him out of the way, but she had to give heed to him instead, or call attention to her own state of mind.

"What is it?" she asked, faintly.

"It's that hybrid girl! Hybrid? No; she's all of one kind, and a bad kind at that. Mrs. Hammond, she must walk the plank!"

"Whom are you talking about?"

"Who should it be but Patience? Egad! the name fits well! I know not how much patience she may have, but it requires a mountain of it for any one to live near her. From the first, Mrs. Hammond, that creature has barrowed up my soul. I can endure it no longer. She must walk the plank, so to put it!"

Mrs. Pearl was troubled. She, too, would gladly have seen Patience go, never to return, but she had a very vivid belief that she could not go; that Spokane Saul would set his foot on the plank with emphasis. In case of any friction, she would be the chief sufferer, even as she was the only one who had cause to dread any disturbance over Patience.

"I see nothing the matter with the girl," she remonstrated, feebly.

"I know you don't, and why that is so I can't for the life of me comprehend. I never would have given my consent to her introduction here if I had known what she was. By Jove! when I saw she was a half-wit I could not restrain my feelings, but you have clung to her like a burr!"

"I clung to her?"

"Well, don't you take her part?"

"In a measure, perhaps. She is an unfortunate child."

"Unfortunate for those who harbor her, I will admit. I am not in the habit of interfering with domestic affairs, but when such an object is forced upon me it is time to set my foot down. She is foolish, slovenly and offensive to the eye. I will not have such a thing here. I speak plainly, and I think I am justified in so doing. Having never meddled with household matters before, I am now firm in saying she cannot stay in my house. Let that be understood, and the sooner you get rid of her, the better you will please me!"

With these words Thomas turned and abruptly left the room.

Mrs. Pearl did not seek to call him back.

She was left miserable and unhappy. If he was anxious to have Patience go she was doubly so. If her presence was obnoxious to him it was a constant menace and horror to her. Gladly would she have seen the child go—yet she could not send her.

Another's will was in the case.

Spokane Saul was ruler!

Mrs. Pearl arose and paced the room. She meditated, and grew more hopeful.

"When this misnamed Samaritan knows of this, will he not think it best to send her away? I will go to him. Just Heaven! what a relief it would be to get her out of the house!"

The speaker threw on her outer garments and, making sure she was not observed by her husband, left the place. She believed she would find Spokane Saul at his office, and in this she was not disappointed. He was there, alone. He received her with his most benign smile.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Hammond! I am delighted to see you, though for your sake, I hope you are not in need of my professional services."

"I am in need of your help."

"You do not look ill."

"My trouble is not of the body, but of the mind."

"More serious yet!"

"You are right: it is. Doctor Littlefinger, I am come to you as a suppliant. I am come because I have endured all I can!"

Mrs. Pearl spoke feverishly, but Spokane did not seem alarmed. He folded his chubby hands in the old way, and his manner was the personification of placid good will to men and the human race in general.

"Pray let me know in what way I can assist you, madam," he urged.

"You can take that girl out of my house. You must do so! I have lived one continual nightmare since she came, but now matters have reached a point where something must be done. To-day Thomas Hammond came to me and declared he would not have her in the house any longer. He ordered me to get her out at once!"

The Samaritan remained calm.

"Did you explain that she was your own child?" he asked, benignly.

"Did I? Most certainly not!"

"I think if you had done so he would not have objected to her remaining with you. Indeed, he could not, for as your own flesh and blood you and she have claims on one another not to be set aside by him or any one else. You should have explained."

"Sir, could you expect me to ruin myself?" cried Mrs. Pearl, feverishly.

"By no means."

"That would be the result if I spoke as you advise!"

The Samaritan looked thoughtful.

"It is hard to believe this," he gently answered. "Mr. Hammond is a man of rare goodness of heart, and he would hardly be the one to separate mother and child."

"Will you never cease throwing that wretched fact at me?" cried Mrs. Pearl, almost hysterically. "What have I done that you should persecute me so bitterly?"

"My dear madam," responded Spokane, in mild remonstrance, "you certainly speak ill-advisedly. Far be it from me to persecute anyone. It has been my blessed privilege," he added, looking upward, "to reunite you to your lost daughter. This has given me unalloyed joy, and I would fain continue the good work."

The visitor sighed. Past experience had shown her how utterly useless it was to try and move this man of ice. She did not try further, then.

"Let us go back to my errand," she continued, as resignedly as possible. "Mr. Hammond swears she shall leave the house."

"When you tell him she is your own child—"

"I shall not tell him any such thing. You must see as well as I that were I to do this all would be over with me. I might as well take flight at once. If ruin is to come I will meet it bravely. I am your slave. Thus far I have endured it, but I might as well defy you wholly, and at once, as to tell him what you ask. I shall not tell him!"

The gauntlet was thrown down, and now she awaited the result. She hoped, in such a dilemma, the Samaritan would weaken so far as to consent to Patience's departure. Anxiously she watched the ruler of her fate.

He was in calm, mild thought.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHO SHALL BE MASTER?

Spokane Saul finally looked up.

"I think I can arrange this," he gently remarked.

"And will you allow the girl to go away?" asked Mrs. Pearl, eagerly.

"You shall hear the report later on."

"Oh! if you will do it I will be your slave!" she exclaimed. "I can endure a good deal, but this is too much. Send Patience away, and I will help you in all conceivable ways."

"We will see. You can go, with the assurance that I will do what is best. I am pleased to have seen you in my office, madam, and trust it may not be the last time. Good-day, friend; good-day!"

She was not ready to go, but he was already bowing her out, so she made the best of it and went her way. She was in a bewildered mood.

"Have I any ground for hope? What did he say, anyhow? I can't for the life of me tell, but if he will send the girl out of my sight I will keep my promise, and do by him as he does by me. Such an ally is not to be scorned. Perhaps if Tom Hammond should give me the shake I might find a protector in Saul— But not so fast! He has not yet freed me, and I fear he may not. Oh! that man is of ice! I never met another like him. His bland smile covers a will like the mighty hills of Rockies!"

Spokane Saul sat down and wrote the following note:

"DEAR FRIEND HAMMOND:—Will you oblige me by coming to my office at once? It is a matter of important business. Always yours,
S. LITTLEFINGER."

Calling a child for a messenger he sent this out, and in half an hour Hammond was down from the mines.

"Your summons found me very busy," he remarked, "but I had faith enough in your judgment to lose no time in getting here."

"Quite right, my dear friend," returned Saul, sweetly. "I should not have called you on a trivial matter. Is there aught new concerning the robbers of the Punch-Bowl?"

"I know of nothing."

"I have been wondering what would be the result of a closer understanding between you and your men, here. You have the robbers to deal with. You don't know them. They are likely to give you a vast deal of trouble. Now, you ought to be united at home. Why not have a frank understanding with the miners? Explain to them that you have been keeping back a share of the gold annually dug here, but tell them the truth—namely, that you did it for their own good."

The Samaritan looked mildly to see the way his proposal was taken. Hammond seemed dumfounded.

"Are you mad?" he demanded.

"Mad?"

"Why, I would not dream of telling them that!"

"Why not?"

"We would all be strung up to the nearest tree within an hour!" was the blunt confession.

"Do you think it would be as bad as that?" and Saul looked just a trifle surprised.

"Why, of course."

"Then it would be idle to consider the matter further. Let me speak of one thing more. I

refer to the child you so kindly took under your care at my suggestion."

Hammond's face darkened.

"It occurs to me," proceeded Spokane, amiably, "that something ought to be done to educate her, and I will share the expense with you. We can get a governess, and she can board with your family. It must be a matter of great comfort to have such an innocent creature with you, as it is; and if this plan of educating her is carried out, you can further pass your leisure moments by watching the progress of the case, and, if you wish, in aiding to educate her, yourself. She might, perhaps, learn faster with you as a tutor than under a paid employee."

Stopping, the Samaritan looked gravely at his companion.

"Man!" exclaimed Hammond, "do you think I am made of iron?"

"I do not understand."

"I, be a tutor for that girl?"

"That is as you will."

"My will is that she leave my house at once!"

"Leave!" repeated Saul, mildly surprised.

"Yes, sir. I took her in as a favor to you, but I did not know what I was doing. Sir, the brat is a simpleton; she is slovenly; she is all that is obnoxious to me!"

"Remember," suggested Saul, gently, "she is alone in the world. Here is a chance for us to do an act of real benevolence."

"For one, I decline! I want no part of her; I will have no part. She must leave my house!"

Thomas spoke with dogged firmness, but the Samaritan remained as serene as ever.

"I trust you will reconsider your decision—"

"I will not! The girl must go. Littlefinger, I have let her come in to oblige you, but I can do no more."

"Not even let her stay for my sake?"

"No. You will excuse me, but I am fixed in this. Let us drop the subject. You would not wonder if you knew the creature as she is, I assure you."

"True benevolence—"

"There, there! Don't get on that strain!"

"But she is homeless—"

"I don't care if she is! She is not the kind of cattle I like to harbor. If you are so set in your wishes, I will, however, pay all her expenses, elsewhere."

"She is better off with you."

"Well, she can't stay under my roof."

Thomas was not violent, but he was as firm as a rock, it seemed. In contrast to him, Spokane Saul did not abate one jot of his usual kind placidity.

"I wish you to consider the matter further. I wish her to stay. Now, if it should come out that you had been robbing the miners of Sabara, it would help you much if you were shown to be the custodian of this innocent, homeless girl; her large-hearted defender."

"I want no such honor."

"But it might be safer. Suppose the world did know of your exact status here. Suppose it did know as much about you as I do? Now, some one might know of it, and yet keep your secret because you were sheltering her. It would not be strange. I would do that!"

Was there an insinuation in the bland voice? Hammond almost thought so, and his expression suddenly changed.

"And if I did not keep her? What would you do then?"

"Duty to her would compel me to take vigorous steps," gently answered the Samaritan.

"What am I to understand by that?"

"Simply that I wish you to keep her."

"And if I refuse?"

"You had better keep her!"

"Is that a threat?"

"A threat? My dear sir, you are mad, almost. But please keep her."

"You cannot persuade me. Do you threaten?"

Hammond leaned forward in his chair as he eagerly awaited the reply. He believed he understood what this persistence meant, at last.

"It would sadden me," observed Saul, closing his clasped hands the tighter, "to do anything to lose one measure of your esteem, friend Hammond; but my duty may compel me to say that you must keep her, or take the consequences of having your secret made public!"

Hammond's face grew pale.

"So that is the kind of a man you are?" he cried, fiercely.

"I do not pretend to be more than an erring man, but I am always ready to aid the poor and needy."

"Saul Littlefinger, you are the biggest hypocrite alive!"

"My dear sir!" gently remonstrated the Samaritan, "I beg you will not speak so hastily. You say that which you would not think of saying in your calmer moments. Something must have made you nervous."

"Yes!" almost shouted Hammond, "something has made me nervous, and that something is you! you, villain!"

He sprang to his feet and took a turn about the room with steps made as if he would tear the floor-boards from their places. Then, at last, pausing before the other man, he added:

"You think you can rule at Sabara, but, by heaven! you will learn a lesson not soon to be

forgotten. I am master here, and I will keep my grip or die in the fight for it. Do you hear? I rule or die, and if I rule, those who oppose me are likely to get their fill of fight!"

His voice was pitched as if Saul was several blocks away, and his manner correspondingly violent, but the Samaritan remained free from anger. He seemed a trifle shocked by such fierceness; no more.

"Friend Thomas, you certainly misjudge me," he mildly remonstrated. "Far be it from me to dispute your mastery at this camp, or in any other way. I do not aspire to worldly gains or position. How do you misunderstand?" and he sighed in the old way.

"Saul Littlefinger, do you intend to say who I shall have in my house, and who I shall not?"

"Far from it, friend Hammond—"

"Stop! Do not talk of friendship until we get this point settled. Do you consent that Patience Jones shall leave my house never to return?"

"For your sake I should be glad to have it so if you really wish, but for hers, and for sweet charity—"

"Stop!"

Thomas spoke imperiously, and then, sitting down again, he leaned forward and added in a calmer, but intense voice:

"I begin to understand you, Saul Littlefinger. You learned that I had been getting the best of the miners here, in a pecuniary way, and you took advantage of the fact to introduce Patience to the house. You did not threaten me, then, but you and I knew that you were using your knowledge of my secret to work your will. I did not object, for I had not seen the girl, and did not know she was a fool. I said she could come, yet I felt I had already yielded a point for the sake of hiding my secret."

"Thomas, I assure you—"

"Next, you overcome my wife's remonstrances. It seems you have some hold on her, though what it is I don't know. Well, you got the brat into the house. You had conquered both my wife and myself. Saul Littlefinger, you did this knowingly to further your own base ends! A fine Samaritan, you are!"

"But, Thomas, you wrong—"

"The cloven hoof shows. It is as clear as day that you aspire to become ruler at this camp. Your alleged goodness is a sham, and you are a scoundrell! You are a base plotter. Hypocrite and knave! you think to be master at Sabara, but I will beat you out or die in the attempt!"

Again Hammond rose and began to pace the room in wild haste. His face was flushed, and bitter hatred was in every way visible.

"Oh! viper, hypocrite and robber!" he added, sibilantly.

CHAPTER XXX.

OVER ALL OBSTACLES!

THERE are times when hot temper and low schemes over-ride meek goodness and unselfishness.

Hammond was a raging tiger, then, as it were, but Spokane Saul did not abate one jot or tittle of his mild manner. Except for a patient sigh there was no evidence that he heard the epithets leveled at him.

"Friend, if you think more carefully on this subject, I am sure you will see more clearly," he gently replied.

"Think!" retorted Hammond. "I have already thought too much for your good. By getting at my secret you became a stockholder in the Sabara mines. Why? Simply to feather your own nest. Oh! you don't care for worldly gains! Oh! no; of course not!"

"Was it not your own offer, friend?"

"Did I not give you the chance so you would not betray us? And didn't you leap at the chance like a trout at a fly? Oh! no; for you don't care for worldly gains!"

"Thomas, this is—"

"Stop!" and again Hammond sat down by the Samaritan. "Man, I don't know why you put that girl into our house, but I suppose it was so we could have an ever-present reminder of our servitude; our slavery to you. Suppose I say she shall leave? What are you going to do about it?"

"I shall feel it my duty to appeal to the miners," placidly answered Saul. "I am poor and cannot pay all her bills. I will tell the good miners of her deplorable state; I will tell them you are amply able to care for her, and prove it by also proving to them that you have been getting rich out of the Sabara mines while they have been starving."

There are times when meekness has to assert itself. Spokane Saul spoke to the point, now, though his voice lost no part of its usual calm intonation.

"I know you at last!"

With this exclamation Thomas relapsed into silence. He had made the fight for his old power. He had fought and failed. He realized how useless it would be to try further. He had not moved the dector in the least. There was silence for some time, and then he spoke in a changed voice:

"I yield! I accept my fate, and will wear the yoke of bondage as well as I can. The girl

shall stay in my house. She will be useful. When I look at her I shall remember you!"

There was an undercurrent in his utterance which told of deep hatred and passion, but even in that Saul seemed to find much of promise.

His face glowed anew.

"I thought when you had taken time for thought you would look kindly upon the proposal—"

"Stop! Let there be no hypocrisy, sir. I have yielded, but only because I am helpless. The girl shall stay!"

He moved quickly to the door. Spokane began to say more, but the defeated man could not endure it. He went out and left Saul still speaking.

"It has come!" Thomas muttered, when on the street. "He and I understand each other. He has won this heat. We will see who wins the next! A next shall come, and I will kill him or regain mastery at Sahara!"

Hardly was the speaker out of sight when another man came down the street and entered Spokane Saul's office. It was the miner with whom the Samaritan had talked about buying up the common people's shares in the mines. He was greeted in the doctor's usual way.

"Good-morning, friend! I trust all is well with you this fine day."

"I am as usual, sir. I have come to talk about your proposal."

"Ah! in regard to the mining stock, eh?"

"Exactly. I have consulted the select few you desired me to see."

"Well?" was the benign response.

"We don't think you offer enough doctor."

"No?"

"No. You offer only one-quarter of what we put in."

"True."

"That makes a big discount for us."

"Friend, remember the mines are not paying."

"Doctor, don't you think they ever will pay?" earnestly asked the miner.

"Never!" sully answered Saul. "The amount of it is, this is utterly barren soil. It was a great mistake to ever locate here, though good Mr. Hammond thought he was doing what was best. He would not do you wrong. A noble man, he is; a noble man!"

"That don't make the mines pay."

"True; too true! And what is worse, they never will pay. I have looked into this with care, friend, and I assure you there is no gold, in quantity worth mining, on the whole claim. Barren; all barren!"

The messenger sat in downcast silence.

"You offer us one-quarter of what we put in?" he went on, presently.

"Yes; twenty-five per cent."

"If you could give us fifty, or even forty—"

"Ah! but I am simply sinking what I do put in, dear friend!"

"Money is precious to us; not because we would be misers, but because we must have it to keep our wives and little ones from starving."

"I know; poor souls! I know!" and the Samaritan's face was a study, so full was it of sympathy. "I know, and I would gladly give you more, but it would mean my financial ruin. I am putting out all I have that I can spare. My heart bleeds for you, but if I were to offer you ten cents on the dollar, instead of twenty-five, I should still be giving you more than I think the property really worth."

"Suppose that luck changed? Suppose the mines began to pay? Would you be willing to give more than the one-quarter, for the sake of the starving wives and children we have?"

"Oh! yes, friend; certainly! Ay, gladly!"

"Will you give us a paper to that effect?"

"Ahem! Ah! Ahem!"

Spokane Saul seemed suddenly to be troubled with difficulty of the throat, and he had to clear away the obstruction laboriously.

"A severe attack of bronchitis," he explained. "Very severe! I at times think this climate will yet undermine my health. Yes, the Sahara claims are played out. The sooner we decide on that and seek our fortunes elsewhere, the better it will be for us. I am sure Hammond and Wayland realize the fact. Now, return to your associates, and say to them that I have looked into the matter with great care, and it is my fixed belief that the sooner you give up the game, the less you will suffer. Remember your wives and children!"

A bright tear glistened in the Samaritan's eye and rolled down his chubby cheek.

"Yes, tell them this is the one opportunity of saving the honest wives and prattling little ones from starvation! Go, friend; go!"

Spokane Saul choked with emotion and lost his voice entirely. He presented a quivering face to his companion, which betrayed how deeply he was touched. Brushing away the sacred dew of sympathy, he arose to indicate that the interview was over.

But the miner *did* remember the "honest wives and prattling little ones."

"You forget one one thing, doctor," he respectfully suggested.

"Yes; the money. It shall be in cash."

"I did not mean that—"

"I know; the time of payment. It shall be in

good time. Now go; go, friend, and gladden the hearts of your fellows!"

The miner was embarrassed, and only a phlegmatic nature saved him from giving up.

"What I mean is, will you furnish us with the paper promising to give more than twenty-five per cent., if the mines should turn around and begin to pay well?"

"Dream not that they ever will pay. It is hopeless to think of it. Now, go to your associates—"

"But the paper!" persisted the phlegmatic miner. "Are you willing to give your written pledge to pay us more, if gold begins to be found more abundantly?"

Spokane Saul seemed mildly surprised.

"Have we not settled that?"

"No."

"Ah! I must have overlooked it. Well, according to law I can give you no paper which will be of any use, in law. Conditional clauses do not apply to outright sales. Were I to give the paper it might destroy not only my title to the gold, but yours as well, which would have the effect of throwing all into the hands of those who owned this land before Sahara was settled."

"But no one owned it."

"Then it would revert to the Government, and we should all be in beggars' shoes. No, friend; such a paper would be illegal. I cannot give it, but you can rely upon my word. Now, go to thy fellows!"

The miner was somewhat surprised to hear that such a law existed, but he believed Spokane ought to know.

He accepted the verdict and went out.

Left alone, the Samaritan fell into meditation. His face remained calm, but there was an air of satisfaction when he finally aroused.

"I think they will accept the chance," he remarked. "If they do I shall be a new Midas. Rich! The word is pleasant!"

Again footsteps sounded, and Daniel Wayland and Julius Cohen entered. Both looked very well satisfied.

"Littlefinger!" Wayland exclaimed, "we want you to make an arrest!"

"Of whom?" calmly asked the Samaritan.

"We should come to you on one errand only. You are chairman of the committee to find the road-agent of the Punch-Bowl."

"And you have discovered that monster?"

"We think we have. Positive evidence is yet to be obtained, but Mr. Cohen is so sure that he wishes to have the suspected man arrested, so he cannot give us the slip."

"It shall be done at once. I will make out the paper, and you can serve it without delay."

"You do not ask who it is."

"I trust in Mr. Cohen's judgment."

"Thank you," replied Cohen, much gratified. "You will see I have made no mistake. I have run the fellow down, depend upon it. His name is Gurdon Forrest!"

"A rough, fiery, rebellious person," calmly returned Saul. "I am not surprised at what you say. Of one like him all things violent and lawless are to be expected. How did you get the evidence?"

"Last night I was abroad in the hills," Cohen replied. "By mere chance I came upon Forrest and another man as they were doing something at a recess in the rocks. As I understand it, they had been moving their plunder, obtained by taking a few hard-earned dollars from Hinch and Moses!"

Julius and Wayland both smiled, showing that the former had been let into the secret.

"He shall be arrested at nine o'clock, at which hour he is likely to be at Damon's."

"That is my plan," added Wayland, "though Cohen urged immediate action. There's no haste. At nine, then, Forrest shall be in the toils!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

"KING OF ALL SAHARA!"

OLIVE was alone in the house when Spokane Saul called, a little later in the day. She had not seen him approach. If she had, the interview might not have taken place. As it was, she was at hand when he called for her and had to go to the parlor.

"Miss Olive, I am delighted to see you!" he declared, his face beaming with great good will. "Truly, the eyes of one's friend are to him like the sun to the earth in spring!"

"Was it me you wished to see, or my uncle?" Olive coldly answered.

"It was you. I knew your good uncle and aunt were out. I came to see you, alone and on important business."

"I am afraid I am not a business person."

"In this case, no one else could replace you. In brief—I am full of impatience—I am come to get your answer to my proposal that we unite our fortunes in marriage! You will remember I have spoken of it before?"

"I do remember, but I have already—"

"Already decided to say, Yes?" questioned Saul, smiling blandly.

"Decidedly not! How many times must I reply to you?" and Olive felt her cheeks burn with indignation.

"Surely you do not mean you are going to say, No?"

"I said so at the start, and I am not one to vacillate in any matter, sir."

"I am afraid you have not used your time to think of this seriously, Miss Olive."

"Patience ceases to be a virtue with you," flashed the girl. "You insult me with your way of managing the affair! I told you at the very beginning what my answer was; I never have wavered in my opinion. Will you persist in your conduct? Once and for all, I will not marry you!"

She looked charming in her indignation, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling; but the Samaritan was not visibly moved out of his usual placidity.

"Do you remember Gurdon Forrest?" he gently asked.

"I have told you there is nothing between him and myself. How many times must I say it?"

"Miss Olive, I have the note you wrote him, warning him to flee from Sahara before he could be arrested for the work at the Punch-Bowl. You went to his shanty to warn him in person. He was absent, so you wrote and left the note, instead. It speaks for itself."

"I decline to discuss the subject," and she made a movement to rise.

"One moment!" he requested. "Hear me! This afternoon men came to me and asked me, as chairman of the committee, to have Forrest arrested at once. A detective has learned enough so it is to be done—that is unless you save him. Only I can save him from his fate—I, through you! Promise to marry me, and no hand shall be laid on him!"

"Are you infamous enough to make such a bargain?"

Olive's eyes were flashing, but Spokane Saul had never been in milder mood. Patiently he answered:

"I have already explained that if you will marry me my deep regard for you would cause me to save him, but if you refuse, my devotion to duty would compel me to let the work of justice go on."

"Infamous! infamous!"

"Pardon me?"

"Man, you will drive me frantic!" Olive exclaimed. "If you were like like other men I should know how to talk to you, but as it is I do not. Are you human? Under the softest exterior you have the heart of a tiger; under a surface of composure you carry the extremes of mingled ice and fire. You bewilder me; you render me powerless. I only know you are the greatest hypocrite living!"

The Samaritan sighed.

"It grieves me deeply to hear you say this."

"You act grievously! So would a tiger, if he was a hypocrite, as well as what he is!"

"Really, we seem to drift further and further apart. Can we make no friendly combination?"

"Never! never!"

"And you will not marry me?"

"I will not!"

"Remember Forrest!"

"Remember him yourself, unless you are all infamy."

Spokane Saul arose, no trace of resentment in his manner.

"This seems a useless talk, and we will cut it short. I am going to my office now. I will be there until eight o'clock. That will be the last moment of grace left to us; the last moment at which we can save Gurdon. If you decide to do it, and keep the lynchers' hands off from him, come to me. After the hour named it will be too late. If he goes to death it will not be my fault. Good-day, Miss Olive!"

With a placid smile the Samaritan passed out of the room and the house. He left Olive in an unenviable frame of mind.

"Oh! infamy, infamy!" she exclaimed, "where will you find another field like that in this man?"

The object of these severe remarks went to his office. He sat down and meditated, but his face gave no clew to his thoughts. Finally he took a sheet of paper and a pencil, and with the one he wrote upon the other these words:

"S. LITTLEFINGER,

"King of all Sahara."

He surveyed it for a moment; then smiled gently, gravely, almost rebukingly. He sighed and murmured:

"Vanity; all is vanity!"

He cast the paper into the fire and watched it burn to ashes.

When the men of Sahara rose the next morning, there was startling news for them. The story started and soon spread that Gurdon Forrest had been arrested, the previous evening, for robbing the miners at the Punch-Bowl. The greatest excitement followed. The facts could not be obtained, but the wildest rumors were abroad.

Rumor even had it that Gurdon had confessed.

All reports, if traced back, would have been found to be emanations from the minds of the leaders of the camp, skillfully spread to make sure the people were with them.

In this they succeeded well. It was not for-

gotten that suspicion had been directed to the prisoner before, and the miners were in a state of mind to turn against their best friends. Hungry men are not so loyal as others. Then, somehow, murmurs went abroad which had an ugly element. One man—it was remembered afterward, that he was one who had been very thick with Hammond, in a certain way—remarked:

"It's lucky for him this is not some camps. It's the fashion of the West to see to such persons with a taste of Judge Lynch!"

A chance word at a crisis often bears fruit, and Puyallup Peter heard this insinuation with uneasiness.

Then the story went out that the place where their accumulated gold was stored had been attacked, one night, and the blame was promptly put upon Gurdon's shoulders.

"Who knows," some one suggested, "but we have been robbed systematically from the first? Perhaps the mines have paid, and perhaps the store-house has been robbed from the first, and by Gurdon!"

It was a theory so dear to the unfortunates that they caught at it with zeal. As a result, a committee was sent to wait upon Hammond and ask his opinion if it could have been. Thomas grasped at the chance. What an opportunity to put all blame on Gurdon, if it should be learned that some one actually had purloined the gold!

He encouraged the idea, and when the committee went back the talk was more incendiary than ever. Judge Lynch! One could hear the name at every turn, and with it went the name of Gurdon Forrest.

His old friends forgot their friendship, and the bitterest feeling prevailed.

The prisoner was to have a hearing at an early hour. Nearly all of the dignitaries were there; Hammond, Spokane Saul and the rest. They were late in arriving, and when they came, a crowd was collected around the public building where he was confined, and where he was to have his trial. As they passed through the party the murmurs of coveted revenge did not fail to meet their hearing, but they did not comment upon the fact. Could it be they would be glad to see it so?

Once inside, Thomas looked around.

"Cohen has not come," he remarked.

"No," Saul answered.

"He is out in the hills, looking for evidence," explained Damon. "I stopped at Wayland's, as I came, but he was awaiting Cohen's return, and could not accompany me here. They will be on hand, though."

The speakers sat down. Hammond and Damon smoked, but this habit was one which, it need scarcely be said, Spokane Saul did not indulge in. He was as far from frivolity as he was addicted to good deeds.

Half an hour passed.

Wayland and Cohen did not come.

Outside, the sound of voices had been growing stronger. It could not fail to be heard by those within, yet nothing was said by them. Finally, the door opened without ceremony. Several miners appeared, with him who had been spreading trouble all the morning at their head. He now constituted himself spokesman.

"We want Gurdon Forrest!" he exclaimed, abruptly.

"How is that?" Hammond answered.

"Trials are long an' unnecessary. Judge Lynch wants a hand in the game! Give us the prisoner, and we'll settle this in short order. Trot out our man! He must hang!"

It was no idle speech. The wild and glistening eyes of the men told of deep earnestness, and if any one had been there who wished to avoid such violent measures he might well have been alarmed for the way of law and order. But no one gave token of such feelings. Hammond turned to Spokane Saul.

"Doctor, you are chairman of the committee," he carelessly reminded.

"Yes, an' we want the prisoner!" added the leader of the mob.

"You do wrong in this," answered Saul, but without his customary zeal to oppose what was wrong. "The law will deal with the wretched man."

"We can't wait for that, an' we want ter teach a lesson which Sahara will not forget."

"Rest assured, the law will do it."

"But we want the privilege."

"Littlefinger," said Thomas, "we leave you to deal with this."

He rose and went to the next room.

"You do not do right to demand this," expostulated the Samaritan, but even the lynchers could see he was not in his usual strength when he gave the verdict; for a good man, he appeared singularly passive to the act of violence.

"Spokane, we must have him!" the leader insisted.

Still Saul demurred, but his half-hearted way encouraged, rather than checked the mob. They insisted; he objected, argued; wavered, at last.

"It is illegal, and I cannot give my consent," he declared, mildly, "but I'll tell you what we will do. There shall be a compromise. We will decide it by chance; by lot. If the chance falls with me, the prisoner shall be held for trial; if with you, do with him as you see fit!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LOTTERY OF DEATH.

THE idea pleased the lynchers. Some of them were reluctant to enter into any such wild work as now occupied their attention, and they caught at the opportunity to get out of it. Their voices drowned the opposition, and the spokesman was obliged to give heed to their wishes.

"What shall it be?" he asked.

"A lottery!" calmly returned Spokane Saul.

"How?"

"I will show you as soon as you promise to abide by it. Do you accordingly promise?"

The chorus answered him, and those who were not in favor of it had to yield. It was so decided. With the matter settled, the Samaritan went about it with zeal. He sent for Gurdon at once, and harried out of the room all except those who were needed.

Two of the lynchers remained as a guard. They, Saul and the prisoner were the only ones allowed to be present.

Gurdon was brought in. He came with a bold step and upright head. Although under a cloud he did not feel like a criminal, and his manner was in keeping with his feelings. He looked at Saul. The doctor was unmoved. He looked at the miners. In their scowling faces he read hatred so deep that he did not seek to address them.

The Samaritan sat down at the table.

"Bring the prisoner opposite me," he directed.

It was done. One of the lynchers held Gurdon's arm, while the other stood a little in the rear with a coiled rope in his hand—most significant object at that time.

"Mr. Forrest," explained Spokane, blandly, "These men demand that you be handed over to Judge Lynch for summary execution. Not liking violence, I have persuaded them to consent to a lottery which shall give you an equal chance for your life. This is about to occur. If it goes one way you are to have an ordinary trial; if the other, you must take your chances with the lynchers."

"And do you countenance any such work?" Gurdon demanded.

"I have felt obliged to listen to the voices of your friends."

"Friends!" echoed Forrest, bitterly.

"No back talk!" growled the leader of the mob. "You have been doin' us up fer years, but you can't do it no more!"

Gurdon was about to answer, but changed his mind, compressed his lips and remained silent.

Spokane Saul had brought out two knives.

"Prisoner," he directed, "look at these. You will see that one is perfect in all ways, but that the other, while equally new, has a nick in the blade. You will be blindfolded, and then I shall take these knives and thrust them in the table, point first, and you, with covered eyes, will take one by chance. If you get the perfect one, you live to have a regular trial. If you get the other, the lynchers will have you at once!"

The announcement, made without any trace of feeling, brought a murmur of approval from the miners, but Gurdon stubbornly set his lips anew.

"Blindfold him!" Spokane added.

The work was neatly done by the lynchers, who then fell back to their former places. The Samaritan drove the knives into the table so they formed a letter "X."

"All is now ready," he observed. "Gentlemen, in order that Mr. Forrest may see we are not trifling with his life, repeat your promise that if he is lucky you will not do him injury."

They obeyed, though far from willingly. Spokane settled back, his hands clasped over his ample stomach, his chubby face the image of calm good will and unconcern. For one who was a man of peace he was singularly indifferent, it seemed, and the lynchers smiled broadly.

"Saul is with us!" one whispered to his comrade.

"Pick up one o' the blades, critter!" the impatient spokesman of the lynchers directed. "Put out the same hand you've used ter rob us, in days past!"

"This blade cuts the other way!" sneered Lyncher No. 2.

"Choose, prisoner!" the Samaritan commanded. "If you chance to pick up the plain knife, you live; if the marked one, you die!"

Gurdon felt a momentary tremor of the nerves. It was no farce, but a lottery in which his life hung in the balance. Horrible thought! The bravest man might well have wavered, but as his flesh began to creep his pride suddenly came to his aid.

He would not give them the satisfaction of seeing him weaken.

Reaching out, with an unshaking hand he sought for and found one of the knives.

Quickly he drew it out.

Then, determined not to be cheated, he tore off the cover from his eyes, and, holding the weapon poised for a moment, next hurled it down so it stuck again in the table close to Saul's hand.

"Well, the verdict?" he questioned.

The Samaritan was unmoved. He picked up the knife and gazed at the blade. Every one was looking at him in keen suspense, but he was

as deliberate as if the occasion was of only commonplace interest. He finally turned his gaze upon the prisoner.

"You are in luck, Mr. Forrest. The knife bears no mark! You have cheated the lynchers out of their prey!"

The leaders of the mob stood dumfounded. In the rush of events they had not stopped to consider that they stood a good chance of losing. They had lost, and the result was most unwelcome.

"Say, that must be tried over again!" cried the spokesman.

"Saul Littlefinger!" exclaimed Gurdon, "I call upon you to stand by your promise!"

"It was all luck!" declared the lyncher, with fine logic. "We call for another test!"

The Samaritan was silent. He gazed at the knife while the men regarded him in impatience. What would be the result? Gurdon believed he could see evidence of a struggle.

"He wants to send me to the rope, at once! Will he dare go back on his own plan?"

At last Saul looked up. He was calm and mild.

"Our pledge has been given in this," he observed. "We cannot waver. Our word of honor is something more sacred to us than gold or jewels, or the glories of old Rome. Honor," and his benign face glowed with restrained fervor, "is dearer to us all than our very lives. Poor, indeed, and paltry, is he who would break his pledged word! We are not of such character. Mr. Forrest, you are as safe with us as the lamb that skips on the green grass of Spring; ay, as the babe that kicks its velvet heel in its mother's arms. You shall not be troubled by the lynchers. You are saved!"

He seemed never to be coming to the point. He indulged more than usual in aimless talk, but he spoke, at last.

The lynchers grew downcast, while Gurdon talked.

"It was a hard struggle. Had he seen one loop-hole of escape the knave would have given the verdict against me!"

Spokane put away the knives and rose to indicate that the interview was over. For the time being, Gurdon was, indeed, saved.

Again the citizens gathered. Few of them but had heard of the lottery of death, now, and with the inconsistency of the species of animals called mankind they began to feel for the prisoner. He had gone through a severe test; he had won. Was it right to put him in further jeopardy of his life?

Unluckily, but few took this view of the matter, yet there were friends among those who came to see him have an informal trial, and a very little thing would turn the tide more fully.

Had not this man been one of their most loyal members in the past?

Could he have turned traitor?

The court convened with Spokane Saul on the extemporaneous "bench." It was known that they only awaited the appearance of Julius Cohen, and when a messenger finally came in and handed Saul a paper, and the latter rose, it was known the show was about to begin.

"Friends," spoke the Samaritan, looking around in his benevolent way, "you all know why we are here. One of our people is accused of a most heinous crime. It is not for me to say whether he is guilty, and I need not, for the evidence, I understand, is most convincing, leaving no loop-hole for his escape; but I will proceed to business without any delay. In what follows one can see the value of uprightness and the result of sin. Oh! dear friends, how the temporary gains of guilt pale before the lasting joys of honor!"

The good man lost his composure for a moment; his voice shook and his eyes grew moist.

Quickly recovering, he went on:

"It is asserted that Gurdon Forrest and no other man robbed the miners at Punch-Bowl. Julius Cohen has gained proof of this."

Gurdon smiled scornfully. A most unprejudiced judge, this! He was condemned in advance.

"Mr. Cohen," Saul went on, "is a detective. He came here to run down the robbers. He happened on them too as they were secreting, or in some way moving, their ill-gotten gains. He recognized Forrest, and he was promptly arrested. Soon Mr. Cohen will be here to give his evidence in full, and then you will see what a great deed has been done for Sahara. More I cannot say without showing partiality, and this I cannot do as a just judge."

He sat down. Some there smiled at his claims to be impartial, but more looked at him in awe and wondered how such a prodigy of goodness could be on a foundation merely human.

There was a stir at the door and Julius Cohen came in. He looked leaner and lankier than ever, and much like a particularly hungry greyhound; but he went to the "bench" without paying heed to any one present. Saul shook his hand warmly.

"We have waited for you, friend Cohen," he observed, "but I trust not with undue impatience. It is a pleasant occasion when we

are all gathered together like this; all with friendly feelings foremost in our hearts."

If Julius made any reply it was not audible to those about the distinguished pair.

"Two human sharks!" thought Olive Hammond. "Now, indeed, will Gurdon be doomed, whether there is any evidence against him or not!"

"Friend Cohen," pursued the Samaritan, "let us get to business. I have in part explained to our friends what has been done before this day, but you will please repeat it."

Julius opened his thin lips.

"I do not think it will be necessary," he replied.

"Perhaps you are right. Have you any new evidence, to-day?"

"Yes."

"Then pray give that."

"I don't think it necessary."

"No? But we want due evidence, in order to bind the prisoner over for formal trial."

"Even that trouble may be spared you," answered Julius. "Trials are expensive. Save money on Gurdon Forrest. He is not guilty!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MR. COHEN EXPLAINS.

THERE was a hush in the room. Few there were, if any, who were not utterly surprised. Even Spokane Saul's ready tongue was silent for a time. At last he found his power of speech.

"Not guilty?" he echoed.

"Not guilty!" declared Julius Cohen.

"But I thought—you said—I supposed you had positive proof."

"I thought I had good circumstantial evidence," confessed Cohen, "but I find I was all wrong. I can only advise that Forrest be set at liberty, at once!"

Again a hush. It was broken by a cheer from such of the miners as had hoped for Gurdon's acquittal, though in this his best friends took no part. They, as well as some of his enemies, were too much dazed to cheer or speak.

Spokane Saul shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His famous command of his face appeared to have deserted him, then. Surprise was imprinted there in very legible characters. More than that, when Olive thought to look his way she believed she could trace bitter disappointment.

Puyallup Peter clambered up on a chair.

"Hurrah fer Gurdon!" he requested. "Do it ag'in! Split yer very brunkel tubes, an' raise yer stomachs up ter help yer lungs be bellusses! Itend the air, an' then jest cheer ag'in! Let'er loose! Scream! Yell! Cheer like mad!"

He threw up his hat in a transport of joy, but Spokane Saul suddenly aroused again.

"Do you say he is not guilty?"

Strikingly peremptory was the question for the Samaritan, but Julius flung the reply back even more sharply.

"Shall I loan you a pair of ears, or can you hear for yourself?"

It was not the right way to speak to a good man, but Thomas Hammond came to the rescue. His own face was pale.

"Mr. Cohen, we want to hear your report without delay, sir!" he forcibly declared.

"You shall hear it, sir. I fail to see why all this tumult has taken place. I have not yet said Forrest did not commit the robbery at the Punch-Bowl, so no one need bite my head off. I fancy I know my business! What I did say was that I have learned he was not the man whom I saw in the hills, the night before last. Hence, I have no evidence against him, and must ask for his release."

"Did you dream what you said you saw?"

Spokane Saul smiled as he asked the question, but Cohen did not seem to think any joke was intended.

"You can keep back your sneers, sir; I know my business! Whether Forrest is guilty or not I intend to prove, for I have made the bargain—and, purposing to draw my pay, am prepared to do my duty until the matter is settled."

It looked as if there was going to be a fight among the leaders, and all because the agent of the prosecution was not ready to convict a man he declared was not guilty, but one of the foremost miners rose and, putting these facts in words, so awakened Gurdon's foes to a sense of prudence that they changed base and went with the tide. Outward harmony was restored, and then Julius told his story.

"I based my belief that Forrest was guilty upon the fact that I saw him in the hills, and saw evidence of what I thought peculiar work having been done—work which would indicate he had been handling what I mistook as being probably the results of systematic robbing of the camp. As I understood it, Trim and Smith lost considerable minor matter at the Punch-Bowl—things they were going to barter at the other camp."

"My theories were natural, but that they were erroneous I now know."

"I have found witnesses who explain all. Certain men are going to start a mining-camp twenty miles north of here. They were not practical miners, so they wanted some one who was to assist them in the new field."

"They knew this town was exclusive, and,

having the impression no outsiders were allowed here at all, they came secretly, spread their blankets in a recess among the rocks just above your town, and waited until they could see some one quietly."

"Forrest first came within reach of them. They accosted him and offered him the chance to go with them. He did not care to do so, and refused. That is the story in brief."

"I am sorry to have wronged any one, and I have wronged Forrest. He may be guilty of the old robbery, but he is not of the work I laid to his door. I recommend his immediate discharge!"

Mr. Cohen sat down, and there was a burst of applause from Gurdon's friends. He had almost every one with him then.

Thomas Hammond saw it would be madness to go against the popular feeling, and he moved at once in the matter. Rising, he spoke with all the amiability he could command:

"We are all agreed in this, I think. Mr. Cohen is so placed as to have exceptional advantages for knowing just what is needed here. He would advise only for the best. Such being the case, I, too, recommend that Forrest be set at liberty without delay."

Another cheer showed how the people had veered around, and Spokane Saul arose and made the discharge formal. This he did in a long address, which brought in his usual references to honor and good reputations, but he did not receive the customary close attention. Gurdon was the hero of the hour, and most of the miners were anxious to crowd around and shower congratulations upon him. Most of them did this to set themselves right for their opposition of the past few hours.

Slowly the party broke up.

Gurdon was not in the most happy frame of mind. The vacillating course of the men disgusted him, and he was eager to get away from them.

Leaving the room, he went into the street and on toward the hills. There, alone, he sat down to meditate on his latest adventure.

"Wonders will never cease!" he muttered.

"Julius Cohen, after hunting me with zeal, has testified in my behalf, and his whole testimony has been a lie. Why? The men who wanted me to go to a new camp were purely imaginary. Why did he state anything of the kind?"

He sat puzzling over the mystery, when he heard footsteps close at hand. He aroused, and was surprised to see Olive. She gave no evidence of knowing he was near, but walked on with lowered head and thoughtful face until, gradually approaching where he sat, she suddenly looked up and saw him. She stopped short. He arose.

"Dare you speak with one who has come so near to being a convict?" he asked.

There was a tinge of bitterness in his manner which did not escape her notice, and it had due effect. Quickly she returned:

"Have I shown any sign of taking sides against you?"

"You have not, but the voice of the world—"

"What care I for the world?" she demanded.

"When was the world ever just? It is swayed by feelings as unreliable as the wind. Others have lifted their voices against you. Did I ever?"

He took an impulsive step toward her.

"Never! never!" he admitted, with force.

"You have been true when they were false. Yes, and I thank you for it!"

"I knew you were innocent."

"How did you know it?"

"Because—because," she hesitated, the color mounting slightly to her cheeks; "because I knew you would not be guilty!"

"Suppose I had been?"

"Then it would have been with some great motive, I am sure."

A sudden impulse came upon the miner. It was not wholly one of temporary madness, for he had all along felt she was with him in sympathy, and he had often been inclined to be frank when he had been the most secretive. He abruptly exclaimed:

"Olive, I am the robber of the Punch-Bowl!"

The color faded from her face. For days she had been combating the evidence of her own senses. All things went to show he was guilty, yet she had stubbornly refused, not to believe, but to admit that she did believe. Now, the truth came from his own lips.

"Are you struck with horror?" he added.

"I repeat what I said. I am sure you had some good motive."

"Heaven bless you for the words! Whatever I have done has been with motives of which I am not ashamed. Errors I may have made, but all has been with an eye to the welfare of Sahara, only. Listen, and you shall know the whole truth. You are Thomas Hammond's niece, but if I cannot do anything for the people my work in this camp is over and I might almost confess to him, too!"

"Yes, I am the robber! Why did I do it? you will ask. You shall hear. For a long time I have believed that our people were being victimized; that the statement that the mines did not pay was false. I believed we never saw one-quarter of the gold mined here."

"Right or wrong, I suspected Hammond and his pet men of getting it out of town secretly and using it for their own good, only."

"I mistrusted the so-called Mutual Balls, and determined to hide at the Punch-Bowl, for once, and see what passed through there while others were dancing at the ball."

"This I did, and I became the robber! Now, you know all!"

He looked at Olive keenly. There was nothing in her face to show that she was shocked. Instead, she eagerly asked:

"And the result?"

He had gone too far to hold anything back. He told all, fully, frankly, and in the course of the narrative made his own position even more clear. This done, he then added:

"You are in possession of the truth. It remains to be seen what you will do about it. It is in your power to send me to the lynchers, in fact—"

"Do you think I would do that? Do you imagine I would betray you?"

"I do not."

"I would rather die!" the girl cried, with energy. "Betray you in a matter where your motives were noble? Never! never!"

Gurdon's face was brighter than it was for many a day.

"Olive, I thank you for the words! You have given a peace to my mind which is new to me. I am glad one person does not regard me as ignoble."

"I honor, I admire you, Gurdon Forrest. Noble, indeed, is he who is willing to suffer in a great cause. I am the niece of Thomas Hammond, as you have said, but I would uphold no one in wrong-doing. More than that, there never has been much good will between me and my uncle. He and I have lived under the same roof, but we have had little in common. It is the same with my step-aunt. No, no; I do not give my sympathy to them. It is with you in your noble efforts!"

"Bless you, Olive; bless you!"

Impulsively the miner seized her hand. No one could know what next he might have said, for his love leaped up like a flame, but they were interrupted. Footsteps sounded, and he was not quick enough in releasing her hand to escape the notice of a pair of keen eyes.

"Hoity-toity!" exclaimed a cracked voice. "By my life! this is a merry scene! Youth and love rule the hour, and two hearts beat as one. Ha! how will the other beat when one is still in death?"

Brown Bet, the Banshee was there.

Olive was covered with confusion, but Gurdon was not so sure he need to fear the ungainly woman.

"Madam, I see you are a wanderer in the hills, too."

"Pah! I don't wander to make love!"

"Wisely, I am sure. Nobody does, in this prosaic age."

"Hol don't we think we are shrewd! And we are only feeble liars! Don't talk in such a strain, callow youth. The eyes of the Dream-Oracle are not filled with dust!"

"At least, I am sure we need not look upon you as an enemy?"

"Don't be so sure of that!" the Banshee retorted. "I like you not, my scoffing boy! Ha! those whom the gods love die young. The eagles of Sahara will get you, boy; they will scoop you up like the dust into which they will make you again!"

"Is the prophecy still on?"

"Tis on while you live, which won't be long, bold robber!"

"Robber?"

"Hist! tell not your secret to other ears. 'Twill come out soon enough for your good; rely upon it. Girl, look on your pretty lover while you may! The eagles will soon rend his feathers!" Her obscure prophecy was colored by her croaking utterance, and Olive shrunk from her. Gurdon, however, remained composed.

"I am no foe of yours, good Bet, and I feel sure you would do me no harm."

"Wager not too much on that. The eagles may need my help. We'll see; and you may see to your sorrow!"

Turning, she walked rapidly away, unheeding his call for her to stop.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MRS. PEARL'S OLD LOVE.

"A GREAT day for Love's young dream, by my life!"

It was the Banshee who made the comment, but Olive and Gurdon were not responsible for it. Leaving them, the woman had walked on toward the west. In a retired place she saw other persons engaged in conversation. Some there were who would have been surprised at the sight, but nothing seemed to surprise the Banshee.

The persons were Julius Cohen and Thomas Hammond's wife.

"Sin and sorrow, sin and sorrow!" murmured Brown Bet. "What a jolly world it is!"

Julius and Mrs. Pearl had met some time before. This was not the result of any engage-

ment, yet they did not seek to avoid the meeting. They came quite close before speaking a word. Pausing a few feet from one another they looked in silence for some time. Julius was the first to speak.

"We meet at last!" he spoke, in a low voice.

"Yes."

Then, silently, again, they continued the survey. Something in each face seemed to interest the other.

"It was a total surprise to me when I saw you at this town," finally added Cohen.

"I can say the same as to you."

"I dare say it was not pleasant to you when you did see me?"

"It was not!"

This frankness was not accompanied by any evidence of marked ill-feeling. Instead, they spoke almost as quietly as if they had been discussing an ordinary business affair.

"I trust you will not think I followed you here, or that I was aware of your presence when I first came?" continued Julius.

"I feared it, at first. Now, I begin to hope. I—I trust I am not wrong?" and there was a most anxious expression on Mrs. Pearl's face.

"You are quite right. I would not have come if I had been aware you were here. I have no wish to disturb you in your happy home."

"A wave of doubt passed over her face. She knew him of old. It was not like him to be so thoughtful for any one but himself."

"You are rich, honored, happy," he proceeded. "You are easily the first lady of Sahara. All the heart can desire is yours. With your riches—"

"I understand. You want hush-money. Well, you promised not to come near me again, but I will not demur since you came to Sahara not knowing I was here. You shall have hush-money!"

"I thank you," he answered, "but you need not open your purse. I do not want your money!"

"Not want it?" she cried, dumfounded.

"No."

"And once, money was your god!"

"Times change, and so do men, sometimes. I confess that the past would lead you to expect me to seek blackmail of you. It was once the ruling impulse of my life, nor were you one whit behind me in that. Right and left we robbed, bleeding those who were so unlucky as to have secrets upon which we could fatten."

"Forbear! forbear!" she cautioned, anxiously. "The rocks may have ears. Speak no secret like that here!"

"You are right; the safest way is the wisest one, yet you will observe my voice was not high pitched."

"I did notice it."

"We meet," pursued Julius, thoughtfully, "but when we part we need not have any feeling of fear one toward the other, I am sure."

"I have a reason for desiring peace. You must have one, also, I am sure."

"I have. I, too, am in a way of prosperity. I am a detective, and successful in my calling. More than that, I am again married. Unlike you I am not exactly rich, but I have some part of the good things of life. Still further, my wife is of a family whose influence is of vast help to me in more ways than one. They buoy me up, financially, and give me social footing. I am too anxious to keep the things I have to make war on you. Each of us has a secret we want kept. By mutually holding our tongues we may sail on upon the sea of prosperity."

Mrs. Pearl's face brightened. She did not doubt what he said, and it was a great relief to hear him.

"We can be friends, then," she answered.

"More than that, we must be!"

"Your hand!"

They crossed palms, and both looked much relieved.

"How the past has drifted away!" Pearl sighed, but not with regret.

"True; it is all gone."

She started nervously.

"Not all!" she returned.

"No? What remains?"

"Julius, do you forget our child?"

"That brat?" he scowled, his face at once betraying the nature which was his. "What of her?"

"Do you know where she is?"

"Happily, I do not."

"She is in Sahara."

"Here?"

There was dismay in his voice; there was more. He glared suspiciously at Mrs. Pearl.

"Did we not agree to drop her, forever?" he added. "Have you weakened and brought the brat to your own town? You are mad, mad!"

"Be calm! Am I a fool? It is no work of mine, yet she is in my own house; she is there as a crucifixion and a menace. Ay, she lives under my own roof to worry me—your child and mine!"

"How is that?"

"An enemy brought her to the place and has used her as a rod of terror. I have tried in vain to get her away. Tom Hammond does not suspect who she is. She bears the fantastic name of Patience Jones."

"What is she like?"

"Weak-minded; almost an idiot."

"Who has put her in there?"

Mrs. Pearl bent and whispered the name of Spokane Saul, following the revelation up with a history of the case. Julius Cohen listened attentively, his forehead knit in a scowl more forbidding than any he had shown before. She ended by saying:

"This so-called Samaritan is as dangerous to you as to me, almost. Now, you are powerful. Can you not beat him out?"

He meditated.

"We were legally married, legally divorced, and now we are legally married a second time. Can he injure us so very much?"

"Why not? If he saw fit to tell of the child's history, would he not tell all about us, too?"

"You are right. Our reputation and prosperity are alike in danger. Yes; it would be ruin if he spoke!"

"I am helpless. Can you do nothing? He does not suspect you."

"It might be possible," mused Julius, darkly.

"This fellow from Spokane is quite a big gun in this camp, but he is only a rush-light in comparison with Tom Hammond! Suppose I get Tom down on him, and have the fellow crushed? He would not be able to make much resistance, with Hammond's grip on his neck. Again, why not prove him the road-agent of the Punch-Bowl?"

"In all these things you forget one thing. He would have a chance to talk, and in that talk would lie our ruin."

"Right! You have given the subject more attention than I. Have you any plan?"

Mrs. Pearl bent forward until her lips almost touched her companion's face.

"Caesar conquered the whole world!" she reminded, "but Caesar, dead, was as harmless as the winds that blew a hundred miles away!"

"I understand."

Julius meditated, while Mrs. Pearl watched him eagerly. Her hopes had risen high. It was a different matter to be fighting Spokane Saul alone and to have a man to aid her who had no reason to fear the person she sought to destroy.

"This Samaritan," she added, presently, "is one you need not hesitate over. He has some repute here, but is, really, as big a knave as walks the earth. Moreover, he is a hypocrite, which is a sin even you and I never were guilty of. Kill him without mercy! Kill him, for only in that does our safety lie."

"You are wise as usual, and I will give the subject due thought. The ways and means I cannot grasp at a leap of the fancy. Give me a little time."

"Gladly; only do the work as soon as possible."

"I will. And now, let us not linger here. Some one may see us together. Let us part, but meet again, soon. Where shall it be?"

"Yes; and where do I come in?"

The question was in a new voice, and the conspirators turned suddenly as it broke upon their ears. They turned, and saw Patience Jones standing beside them.

Mrs. Pearl grew pallid, while Julius, though he did not recognize her, was but little less affected. Both realized that they had had a listener. What did that not mean to them?

"I want a share in the good things my father and mother have!" proclaimed Patience, with airy nonchalance. "I never thought to see this day, but if you ain't ashamed to recognize me, I ain't!"

There was no reply.

"Why don't you say something?" Patience asked, fretfully.

"Girl!" gasped Mrs. Pearl, "what are you doing here?"

"Well, I jest thought if you was my father and mother you ought to take me under your wings, kinder."

"Absurd! We are not."

"But I heard you say you was!"

Mrs. Pearl looked helplessly at Julius. Patience was a stranger to him, but it was not hard to comprehend that she was the child of whom they had been talking.

"Young woman, do you understand you are making a serious claim?" he asked. "Do you know there is a law against blackmail?"

"I don't know what your high-flown words mean," she returned, "but I heard you say you was my father and mother, and that's just what I'm in need of. They have to take care of their children, too, which will just about suit my case. Hoop-lal! won't I roll in the fat of the land, and have a boss time? I ain't ashamed on you! Folks always told me I was homely enough to stop a clock, but now I've seen you, old chap, I know where I got it!"

Julius was demoralized. For a time he had forgotten Pearl's assertion that Patience was weak-minded, but he could forget it no longer. At that serious moment she swung her hat in the air, and her manner was even more flippant than her words.

He gazed at her as if he saw a ghost. It was bad enough to find such a child, but that he was menaced by one of such mental caliber was even worse.

Mrs. Pearl looked at him in an agony of fear. Would he find a way out of the danger?

"Say, are you two struck dumb?" demanded Patience.

"Your absurd claim is enough to strike any one that way."

"Oh! I heard you and her ladyship talking about it, and you can't squirm out. A father and mother is just what I've always been looking for, and I'm not going to miss the chance to catch on, now. Not much!"

"We were not in earnest."

"I'll ask Spokane Saul if it is right. He brought me here, and he will know."

Julius and Mrs. Pearl exchanged glances. It was clear they must meet the danger squarely.

"If we let it be as you say, you must leave Sahara," observed Julius.

"Oh! I reckon not!" exclaimed Patience, cunningly. "Want to get me off where I won't have any one to stand by me, do ye? I ain't so green as I look."

"What do you want?"

"To be recognized as your kid and have lots of fine clothes! I want a red dress, and a pair o' gloves that'll come clean up to my elbow, like hern!" and Patience pointed to Mrs. Pearl.

"Then I want a carriage of my own, and a servant I can boss and cuff! Yes; and I want a glass ring like hern, and some glass things ter wear in my ears."

Patience seemed capable of running on forever, but Julius took the matter in hand energetically. He promised to give her all she demanded, but in return she must wait a little, be patient and silent, and let no one know what was going on.

She agreed readily. Would she keep the pledge?

CHAPTER XXXV.

SAUL.

ALL seemed settled. Patience was in the best of humor. If she and they kept their promises she would be happy and they need fear no exposure for the time being.

"Now go home," directed Julius, "and do not fear but you will get these nice things."

"Oh! I'll get them, all right. If you should try to cheat me, I'd tell Spokane Saul!"

Saul!

Julius Cohen was suddenly reminded of an unpleasant fact. Patience had heard them talk of herself. Had she also heard what was said about the Samaritan, and that he was so dangerous to them?

"Child," he gently remarked, "how much did you catch of our talk?"

"Oh! pretty much all!"

"Did you overhear us saying nice things about Spokane Saul?"

"Didn't hear his name mentioned, at all."

Patience looked steadily into her questioner's eyes.

"Not a thing?" he persisted.

"Not a word!" and the girl did not waver.

"We only remarked that he was a nice man."

"You wa'n't afraid I would tell of that, was you?"

Julius was embarrassed by the response, but managed to get his feet on the ground, again, metaphorically. He did not give Patience credit for ability to lie with skill, so he decided she had not caught matter dangerous to them. They certainly had lowered their voices when referring to the Samaritan. He finished up the talk with her, and then sent her away. She went with a step meant to be coquettish.

"Our daughter!" murmured Mrs. Pearl.

"Woman, don't refer to it again! I could die of shame!"

"Let us hope we may have no other reason for dying."

Julius caught the speaker's arm.

"Saul Littlefinger must die this night!" he hissed.

"Now you talk like your old self!" cried Mrs. Pearl, admiringly.

"This girl may be all right, but we dare not trust her. Saul knows too much. He could ruin us, and I believe he will, if given a chance. We must strike ahead of him. He must die!"

"Good! good! I admire your courage."

"I did not come here to act the murderer, but he forces us to it. To-night we win safety or death!"

Spokane Saul sat in his private office. A miner entered.

"Good-afternoon, friend!" greeted the Samaritan, blandly.

"I have come with the decision of the men, sir!" abruptly announced the messenger.

"Well?"

"We have decided to accept the offer you have made us. We will sell you our interest in the Sahara mines for one-quarter of what we originally put in."

"A wise decision."

"There has been much demur, for it was throwing off a good deal, and many of us thought you ought to agree to give us more if the mines chanced to begin paying at any future time."

"Impossible, impossible!" returned Saul, with more than usual haste; then, quickly resuming

his old manner, he mildly added: "What I mean is that 'tis impossible for them ever to pay. Barren soil, friend; barren soil!"

The miner sighed.

"My poor children!"

"Be thankful you can do so much for them as you have. You get twenty-five per cent of what you invested. Not bad, since the property is really worthless. Hammond realized it. A good man, sir; a good man. His heart bleeds for your sufferings, but he has been helpless."

"Is the paper all ready, doctor?"

"All ready. Here it is. I have drawn it up carefully; you will find it all right. When can you deliver it to me? I would like it by tomorrow morning."

"You shall have it then. I will get the signature of every man except those you bade me omit, and it shall be in your hands at an early hour."

"Good! Remember, friend, you are not to mention the transaction until I give you leave, for it means the death-knell, the desertion of Sabara. No other party will ever come here. Hence, Sabara dies when you sell out."

"We will be silent, sir."

"Here is the deed."

He passed over the document. The miner read it carefully, but it was one to which he could not object in any way. So he put it in his pocket and went out. His steps were slow and heavy.

"A great sacrifice; a great sacrifice!" he murmured. "Only one-quarter. One dollar for four dollars! If it wasn't Spokane Saul I should be in favor of backing out, even now, but he would not cheat us!"

And Spokane Saul, Samaritan, good physician, philanthropist, meek friend and unselfish helper, gently observed to himself:

"The property is worth twenty dollars for every one I am about to pay!"

A smile of mild satisfaction illuminated his chubby face.

Presently there was a knock at the door. A visitor entered. It was Patience Jones. Her eyes were glittering.

"Say, they're goin' to kill you!" she declared, excitedly.

The Samaritan regarded her in placid interrogation.

"Pray, to what do you refer?" he asked.

"It's Pearl and Julius Cohen, and they're my pop an' marm!"

"How is that?"

"They're my pop an' marm, and they're goin' ter kill you!" explained Patience, thinking she had it clear, at last.

"We may well get a little more light on the subject," remarked the doctor, serenely. "Let us take the matter up more in order. Order, my child, is one of the noblest things in the world, next to good-will to man and love to all. Oh! the calm joys of a correct life are wonderful!"

He looked raptly at the ceiling, much to Patience's amazement.

"Say!" she exclaimed, "didn't you hear me say they was goin' to kill you?"

"I did, and you will please vouchsafe more light on the subject."

"Well, you're a cool one!" declared the girl, dumfounded at his gentle composure.

Saul did not answer the comment, but proceeded to get the story. Patience proved her own assertion that she was not so foolish as she looked. She had heard nearly all the conspirators had said about killing the doctor, and she now told the story in a way which made all clear. Saul listened attentively.

"I do not think this was anything more than a joke—"

"If you keep on thinking so you will never live to laugh over it!" Patience exclaimed.

"I will treat it as a serious matter, of course. I thank you for your information, child. You are now experiencing the joys of doing good to your fellow beings, Patience; the noblest work in which man or woman can engage. Truly it is!"

Nothing could move the good physician, but he sent the messenger away feeling he would not neglect any chance.

That night he retired as usual. Perhaps he had forgotten the warning, for he did not take any precautions to guard against intrusion. Calmly he retired to his righteous couch. In due time his breathing grew heavy. He seemed to sleep.

Midnight came. The winds murmured in Sabara as if whispering a song of peace and good will. Was it the wind which rattled the window frame a trifle? Perhaps, yet it hardly was the wind which pushed the sash up. This might have been done by the man who immediately, but very cautiously, crawled through the aperture. Slowly, carefully, almost silently he came.

A few steps and he stood by Spokane Saul's bed.

He raised one hand aloft.

A lone ray of moonlight struggled in through the window and touched the hand. Out from the hand, or something in it, went a little gleam, pale, uncertain, tremulous; like, and yet unlike, the moonlight.

The hand fell.

It fell, but only to be caught at the wrist in Saul's own strong fingers. The intruder struggled, but in vain. He was held as in a vise. The Samaritan sat up.

"Good-evening, Mr. Cohen!" he spoke, as calmly as if the occasion was of the most ordinary kind.

"Let me go! Let—"

"Gently, Julius; gently! We have ample time to discuss this matter. Allow me to take your knife! You do not need it here, for we are both law-abiding men. That is right. Now, sit down, Julius! The hour is late, but a call from one's friends is always in order. Pray make yourself at home!"

He had pushed the intruder backward, and seated him in a chair.

The latter was dumfounded with dismay.

"Have you come to talk on business?" inquired Saul, blandly.

"Man, are you a demon?" burst from Cohen's lips.

"My dear sir!" expostulated Saul.

"As well might I try to fight an iceberg or a raging fire! You are as resistless as either, and like both, differ as they may."

"Friend, you talk at random, and rather forget the object of your call. Let us consider that, first."

"Why should I talk? You caught me with my knife raised over your heart. You know I came to kill you!"

"I did think it might be something of that sort," placidly replied Spokane. "It is lucky I awoke as I did. It saved me from unpleasant consequences, and you from an act hardly one of philanthropy."

"Had I known you as I do now I would never have dreamed of doing the work."

"You doubtless mean that you now realize I am not a hard man."

"You are a fiend!" Cohen broke forth; "a cool, nifty, matchless fiend! In all my life I never saw another like you!"

"I trust," deprecatingly remarked the suspect, "I have not done any deed, for which the censorious can blame me. But who shall say? What one of us is perfect? Not one! Does not the good Book say so? Of a verity it does, and man can not escape what is there adjudged the lot of all. Being human, we err. I am only a weak vessel in the array."

"Human? That you are not! Men are not made in the frame you inhabit. Such coolness is that of fiends!"

"You grieve, but let us not discuss the point. You say you came to kill me. Why?"

"I refuse to say."

"I will not press you. On one point, however, pray enlighten me. You are said to have an ally in this work in Mrs. Pearl Hammond. I request you to deny this if you can conscientiously. Do not use falsehood, though, for that were not right. Truth is a pearl of great price!"

"What do you know of her?" Julius demanded.

"It was told me she was your abettor in the work of slaying me."

"Patience!" thought Julius, in a rage.

"Can you clear Mrs. Hammond?" continued Saul.

"I decline to answer any question. Do with me as you will!" sullenly returned the detective.

"Why, friend, I have nothing to do with you except to make your visit as pleasant as possible. Untimely as some might think it, you are very welcome, and I am sure we shall part friends, as usual."

Julius could not avoid a groan. He placed no confidence in the intimation that he was to be allowed to go free, and the coolness of his master was shocking to him.

Yet, he had another surprise. For an hour the Samaritan sat and talked on trivial matters, always in a mild way; then he politely asked to be excused, as he was sleepy. So Julius went away.

Confused, uncertain, filled with alarm and rage, he went to Hammond's house. Mrs. Pearl was awaiting his return.

"What luck?" she asked, eagerly.

"Luck? It is ruin, ruin! Where is Patience? She has betrayed us. She is not so much fool, after all. Take me to her; take me there, and I will reward her treachery!"

And when the story was all told they did go to Patience's room. The girl did not suffer in consequence.

The room was empty. Patience was gone!

Blankly the plotters looked at each other.

"The whole game is in Spokane Saul's hands!" groaned Cohen. "We are ruined, ruined! He is a merciless master, and we are helpless in his grasp!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BEFORE THE STORM.

OUTWARDLY, all was as usual at Sabara the next day. Each one was attending to his or her every-day business, as far as could be seen. Saul, the Suspect, had never been calmer in appearance; Julius Cohen went his way in the old

fashion. Yet he and Mrs. Pearl were preparing for work. They must do something, and do it soon, and the coming night was set for action.

That afternoon Olive went by appointment to the hill. She was to meet Gurdon, but was somewhat surprised to see Puyallup Peter also.

"Olive," began Gurdon, abruptly. "you have made me happy by declaring you would not uphold Thomas Hammond and his men in any wrong-doing here—"

"I would not!" Olive declared. "Were he a thousand times my uncle, I could not look upon his injustice to the poor miners with aught but horror."

"Dare you see my belief proven?"

"If my uncle is guilty, I would gladly see it proven."

"Remember that the consequences would strip him of his power; ay, and of his money. He would become a convict, and you would be—"

—he faltered over the word—"a beggar!"

"I care not for that. Let justice be done!"

She made the decision, not with headlong enthusiasm, but with firm composure far more impressive and reliable. Gurdon impulsively grasped her hand.

"I honor, I admire you for the noble decision. May fate be kind to you, whether we win or lose this battle!"

"But the evidence?"

"At present it can scarcely be called conclusive. Puyallup Peter has happened on a series of facts which give me great hope we shall be able to show how the gold-sharks of Sabara disposed of their ill-gotten wealth. This I have tried to do in the past, but always in vain. Now, Puyallup has a clew which, I am sure, will not be false to our hopes. This I am going to follow. To-night I leave this camp. I shall return victor or not come at all. I hope my return will be in due order, and that it will mean the dawn of a better day for this unhappy town."

"Amen!" exclaimed Olive.

"Encore!" added Peter.

"I did not know you were in the fight," remarked Olive.

"Miss, I'm in it up to my fetlocks, or higher. I am about swamped in it, b'durn!"

"I am glad Mr. Forrest has such a good friend."

"I ain't no lame duck," agreed Puyallup, modestly.

"Stand by your associate, Peter!"

"We stick till we win, or the hemp brooses our collars pernicious bad, b'durn! Lynchers hev no terrors fer the classic mind, an' ef we ain't classic, I'm a mule with a split hoof."

There was no accounting for the eccentric turns of Puyallup's fancy. Unique to a degree, he said and did things in a way peculiarly his own.

"Let us not linger here," advised Gurdon. "As matters stand, we must not be seen with you too much, Miss Olive."

"Correct, b'durn!" put in Puyallup, "an' I reckon I may as well go first. I'll pause at a distance while you young folks settle the preliminaries. Settlin' preliminaries is kinder pleasant fer folks o' your age!"

Wicked Peter grinned knowingly, whereupon Olive blushed divinely. The speaker went his way, and it did not take the others long to finish whatever they had to say. This done, Gurdon joined his ally and they walked away toward the west. Olive watched them go.

"May Heaven prosper them!" she murmured.

"Heaven prospers no such iniquity."

It was a harsh voice near her side, and she turned quickly. The result was startling.

Thomas Hammond was there!

His face was pale and strange of appearance, and his eyes blazed with fury.

"So you have been with him!" the mine president exclaimed, huskily.

Olive could not find words in which to answer. His fury was bad enough, but more than that came the mental question: Had he overheard their talk? If so, what hope remained for Gurdon?

"Have you lost your tongue?" added Thomas, sharply.

"Uncle, you frightened me."

"Very likely. One does not like to be found out in infamy!"

"Infamy?"

"You have been with Gurdon Forrest."

"Well?"

"Well! It is not well! It is shamefully ill, rather! How dared you be with him?—a man despised by all Sabara!"

"What has he done?" and Olive listened eagerly for the reply.

"He is believed to be the road-agent of the Punch-Bowl."

"I notice he has not been proved guilty."

"He has not," Thomas confessed, gloomily; then he more keenly added: "That does not prove him innocent. I think he is guilty. Yes; and there is no knowing what else he is engaged in. What have he and you been talking about?"

Olive's spirits rose.

"I do not know that I need explain."

"Nothing good, I dare say. See here; I want you to keep away from that knave!"

"I will consider the matter, sir."

"You will not consider it; you are going to obey me. Obey! Do you hear?"

"I am not deaf."

"Insolence! Yes; and there is rebellion in your voice! See here, what have you and he been talking about?" and Thomas suddenly yielded to anger and passion. "Make a clean breast of it!"

"I have nothing to say, sir."

Hammond caught her by the arm, roughly.

"By the fiends! I am going to have a reply. Tell me all!"

Olive began to be afraid. She had never seen him in such a mood before. It was a dangerous mood. She tried to release herself, but failed. He grew more excited.

"Answer, or you shall suffer for it!" he hissed. "I'll have no traitor in my own camp. Speak out, or—"

Half-unconscious of what he was doing, he seized her by the throat.

"Speak!" he added, fiercely.

Olive struggled in that iron grasp. She tried to cry out, but his grasp prevented. She was in terror. She feared the worst.

"Mercy! mercy!" she managed to whisper.

"There is no mercy for traitors!"

Then came the sound of a blow. His hold relaxed; he staggered back. A cry of pain had passed his lips, and he stood holding his arm as if some calamity had occurred to it. Then came a mocking laugh.

"How do you like your medicine?"

Olive turned toward the new-comer. Brown Bet, the Banshee, was there, and in her hand was a long staff. It had been a blow from that extemporaneous weapon which had stopped Hammond and almost broken his arm at the same time.

"Brave assailant of women! How do you like it?" added the Banshee, with another laugh.

"You wretch! how dared you strike me?" almost shouted Thomas.

"It took no great courage. Do you want to try it further? I should dearly love a brush, and you seem to like fighting women. Try me!"

Hammond moved the stricken arm. It had for the time lost its power. Even if it had not, he was not sure he had any desire to attack the Banshee while she held the staff.

"Birds of a feather flock together," he remarked, sullenly. "You two are fit companions. I will leave you to yourselves. I want no part of you."

He turned away, and Bet flung after him the retort:

"Thank you for nothing. We don't carry buzzard-feathers, like some I know of!"

The answer was unheeded. Thomas had turned away, and he kept going. Not once looking behind him, he moved quickly toward the camp. Olive watched him in silence for some time, and then turned toward the Banshee. A third person had come upon the scene, unnoticed by her. It was Patience.

"Gee-golly! didn't we do him up!" the girl exclaimed. "He got a swipe that made his bones curl up in knots, I'll bet!"

"What do I not owe you?" Olive murmured, looking at Brown Bet.

"You owe me nothing," was the retort. "I'm not soft-hearted. I don't think I'd have interfered if this child had not told me to."

"Yes; you would, too!" declared Patience. "Your eyes were like a catamount's. I expected you to spring right onto him."

"Nonsense! my heart is of stone!" Bet persisted.

"We need not argue that," Olive answered. "It is enough that you helped me. Good woman, I can never help you sufficiently."

"Don't try, then. I'm no chicken to be coddled and flattered."

"It is no use for you to shirk your honors. You are a person of more good deeds than the world knows, I do believe."

"That's right," put in Patience. "She helped me, too."

"Child, you disappeared from our house—"

"You bet! I'm done there, too. I've adopted the Banshee, and where she goes, I go."

Olive was not sure she approved of the girl making Bet her companion, but it was no time to voice ungenerous ideas. So Olive remained silent on that point, and devoted herself to what seemed proper thanks for her rescue. Bet condescended to be more gracious, and matters went along smoothly. After a little while, however, the Banshee prepared to leave, and Patience kept close to her, evidently afraid Olive would claim her. The two moved toward the Punch-Bowl.

Despite her adventure, Olive was not afraid to return home. She knew Thomas had acted from impulse, and though he had shown the possession of a bad heart, she did not think he would renew the attack upon her.

She started homeward.

Not far had she gone when she saw two men moving among the rocks. They had a certain stealthy way, as if they did not wish to be seen, and this was so striking that Olive took care not to intrude upon them.

They disappeared, but she had advanced but little further when she discovered another couple.

She paused in wonder. Strangers were almost unknown at Sahara. What had sent two parties there, all of a sudden?

As she watched them go she saw more. They met Brown Bet, and fell into conversation as easily as if they were prepared for the meeting.

"They must be friends of hers, but what has brought them to this camp? It is singular!"

One thing Olive did not see. Still another party was in the hills. In a recess among the rocks, at that moment, Julius Cohen was parting from Hinch Trim.

"Remember," said the detective, "it must be to-night!"

"To-night it shall be," agreed Hinch. "I'll do it with zeal. When you an' Tom Hammond agree, the thing goes. Forrest shall die!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE MOB.

THE miners were at Damon's cafe. The master of the place had been absent all the evening, though there was still time for him to appear, for it was only eight o'clock. His wife was ailing. This left no one to do the honors but Puyallup Peter, and he was filling the position with zeal and good judgment.

This evening the men were, as a whole, unusually silent. They had good reason for the mood. That day they had ceased to be owners in the Sahara mines. They had asked themselves, time and again, if they had done wisely, and the haunting fear that they had not, made them serious, indeed. If they had received anything like what they had paid in they would gladly have parted with the stock and with Sahara, but Spokane Saul had paid so little that they were in gloom.

Had they done wisely?

Gurdon Forrest and a few others were still ignorant of the sale, they being among those who, Saul had insisted, must be kept in ignorance.

A miner looked upward.

"Something is in the loft," he remarked.

"Rats!" decided Puyallup. "I ain't ever seen any at this camp, but I knew they would come. Rats always follow me! Me an' rats are old friends. When I don't see rats I shall think—"

There was a crash. Those who were looking up saw a board tip and sink. Close after it came a human leg. Then a man dropped down.

The room was high. Despite this, one might have met the fall and escaped serious injury, five times out of six. No such luck attended the present adventurer. He struck heavily, and the report of a revolver followed. Then he uttered a wild cry.

"Why, it's Hinch Trim!" exclaimed Ulric Helgren.

The fallen man was floundering about in what seemed an aimless way. He clawed at space, and writhed along the floor. Those who observed him saw a pool of blood gather.

Helgren sprung forward.

"He's bad hurt!" the latter declared.

Hinch groaned.

"I've got my last wound!" he declared, wildly.

"How did you do it, and what were you doing up in the loft?"

Hinch rolled his eyes about until he saw Gurdon Forrest.

"There's the one that did it; he's the one!"

"Nonsense! He did not touch you."

"Don't you see?" demanded Hinch, feverishly.

"I came ter kill him, an' I got killed, instead. I was watchin' fer a chance ter shoot him from ambush, an' I had my way of escape open, but the floor tipped up an' let me down. I fell, an' my own revolver was discharged an' killed me. Oh! I'm a dyin' man; I'm dyin'!"

He seemed to collapse utterly, and some of the party proceeded to minister to him. His confession that he had tried to murder Gurdon put his stock at the lowest ebb, but common humanity demanded some attention to one who, plainly, was at the threshold of the other world. Brandy was given him and he revived somewhat, but the idea remained strong in his mind that he was at the point of dissolution.

"Oh! this is a hard end!" he groaned.

"Why did you try to kill Gurdon?" asked Helgren.

"Tom Hammond and Julius Cohen hired me to do it!"

There was a murmur of doubt which reached Hinch's ears.

"It's true; it's true!" he cried. "Don't you think Hammond is such an angel; you don't know him as I do. No, but you shall. I ain't goin' out o' the world with all this on my mind. Men, you have long been robbed in Sahara. You have starved while others have got rich. Who says the mines of this camp have not paid? I swear they have paid richly, but you were not in it. You have been robbed—robbed by Hammond, Wayland, Damon, Meek Moses an' me. We have had gold by the bushel, while you have had nothing!"

The miners stood dumfounded.

"It begun from the first," added Hinch. "It was all plotted before you left Sweden, an' it has gone on all the time. Load after load of dust have Moses an' me taken over the mountain for

the good o' the few, while the many starved in the town!"

Conviction went with the confession. No one who heard doubted for a moment.

Gurdon Forrest stirred into life.

"Let the confession be put into writing," he interrupted, quickly. "Let it be signed by Trim. Yes; and let Saul Littlefinger be called to put him under oath."

"No, no; not him!" requested Hinch. "He is in the plot, too. He got onter our secrets, a few days ago, an' sence then he has been a sharer in our plunder. He's as bad as any on us."

"Never mind," answered Gurdon. "We have enough here to carry our point. We are all united. Men, I fully believe all Trim has said. I have long suspected Hammond and his men were robbing us. Now we will prove it. Yes, and we will see gold pour into our pockets instead of going hungry. A new reign has been begun, and our stock will pay us so we may well forget the past."

A strange murmur arose from the miners.

"Too late!" groaned Helgren.

"Too late?"

"We have sold out all we have to Spokane Saul!"

"Sold to him?" muttered Hinch, looking up feebly.

"Yes, only this morning. He begun to work on us a week ago, and now all of us but three have sold to him."

"A week ago?" echoed Hinch. "Why, that was when he first got onto the plot, an' demanded we let him in fer a share o' the plunder! Did he give ye what your stock was worth?"

The ex-stockholders looked at each other. One thought was in each mind. They remembered how secretly Saul had worked; how he had left certain ones out; how he had refused to give them a paper promising greater pay to them if the mines should suddenly begin to pan out well. It was a horrible shock.

"Men!" cried Helgren, fiercely. "We have been victimized by Spokane Saul! He has robbed us! He knew of the richness of the mines, and as soon as he did know of it, he set out to get our stock. You know how much he paid us!"

A roar of rage rose from the men.

"Spokane Saul is a scoundrel an' a hypocrite!" added Hinch. "He has played the dickens with Hammond an' all o' us. He is a traitor an' a thief!"

Louder grew the murmur. Rage moved the miners to the boiling pitch.

"Men, what are we going to do about this?" Helgren demanded.

"Lynch him!"

It was the rallying cry of the wild West—a cry which, once started, usually leads to bloodshed. The suggestion took hold. It came at a time when their passions were hot. The breeze became a tornado.

"Lynch him! lynch him!" was the general cry.

Dying Hinch was forgotten. Matters nearer to their pockets held the attention of the men. Victimized, only revenge remained to them. The room was suddenly emptied. Out went the mob in a headlong rush.

With the party went Gurdon Forrest. He did not add his voice in any way, but he would have been a prodigy had he not gone with the tide.

Through the streets they went. With them went a murmur of many voices, and all pitched in one key. Revenge was the watchword. On, on with a frantic sweep; on, with the ominous murmur and the hot passion growing hotter; on for blood!

They reached the house where Spokane Saul stopped. A light was visible in his room. He was there, ready for their work.

They stopped. Then their voices rose in a new cry; a call for their victim. The name of Spokane Saul was on every lip. Such a call could not long be unheard. There was a motion of the upper window; a man appeared to view. It was the Samaritan.

He came out bland as ever, smiling and bowing like a highly flattered politician. His face beamed in the old way.

"Friends," he spoke, in a clear voice, "I thank you for this visit. I am always glad to see my fellow-citizens, for my heart beats warmly for them. Our pleasant intercourse has touched my deepest feelings, and I hail you all. I am pleased, I am honored by your call. I thank you; I tender assurances of my good will; I rejoice to see those who, I know, are moved by the truest sentiments of honor!"

The coolness of the man had kept them for the time silent, but the storm finally broke forth again, and it came in words not to be misinterpreted:

"Lynch him! lynch him!"

On the hills back of the town a group of three persons stood on a ledge. They were Olive, Mrs. Pearl and Julius Cohen. The former was at one side, while the others were regarding her in sullen discontent and anger.

"Will you come along?" Julius demanded, sourly.

"I will not!" Olive distinctly replied.

"Will you force us to severe measures?"

"I simply refuse to go further."

"Girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Pearl, "you are laying up for yourself an ample store of trouble. We are not to be turned from our purpose by anything. Come, or it will be the worse for you!"

"I will not go!"

Olive sat down, while they regarded her in fresh anger.

"An obstinate minx!" muttered Julius.

"What can you expect? You have taken me from my home. I am a captive. Do you expect homage from one thus situated?"

"We only ask you to go to a place where you will be out of our way for a time. We have no intention of hurting you. If you had let our secrets alone you would not be here, anyhow."

"Was I to blame because Patience told me what she did?"

"You have from the first coddled and made much of the brat!" retorted Mrs. Pearl.

"Why not, when her own flesh and blood rejected her?"

"Fine talk, but you know too much for your own good. We must keep you prisoner for awhile. Come!"

"I refuse!"

Olive kept her place, and Julius quickly stooped and lifted her. Grasping her arm in a painful hold, he added:

"You will come or fare the worse. This night is one big with destiny to us. We will let no chance slip. We defend our interests at all cost. Obey me and you shall not be harmed. I can arrange all if I am given a little time, but as for having you near to betray us when silence is the most necessary, we will not. Come!"

He forced her along, and she, seeing the folly of resistance, went in moody silence. As they were not to be trusted, she did not know what was ahead of her. She had been kidnapped from her home. It was in their power to do with her as they saw fit. Would they improve the chance to get rid of a dangerous witness against them?

Was she going to imprisonment or to—death?

It was a night which meant much to more than one in Sahara. Olive thought of Gurdon and prayed that he might come to her aid, but this he did not seem likely to do. She struggled on in a listless way, ever restrained from energetic action by Julius's hand. He did not relax his hold.

It was slow progress, and not much ground had been gone over when Mrs. Pearl paused on the brink of a cliff.

"I must rest," she said. "I am not accustomed to this hard work; it wearies me exceedingly."

Julius said nothing, but kept his place near her. He looked back at the camp. At that moment he would have given all he possessed if he never had come to Sahara. His had been a life of crime and evil-doing. That he had turned from the old course was not owing to any stings of conscience, but to the fact that he had seen a way to make more money as a catcher of thieves.

Now, his all was in peril.

Olive looked around. Was it possible to break away and make a dash for freedom?

The rocks were black and frowning. There was ample room to hide if once she could shake off the companionship of those she so hated, now.

What was that? A moving shadow! A vague shape—a something she could not define. It came nearer. She gazed in a rapt way. It was like a human being.

They were not alone in the hills.

She watched with her heart beating fast. What, if anything, did it mean to her? Julius turned around. He, too, saw the shape. He assumed a defensive attitude, but with a long leap the prowler was upon him. The sweep of a staff felled him to the earth.

Two persons rushed forward, and one deliberately seated himself on Cohen's person.

"Come to my arms, birdie!" he directed, "The fish are saved, and the wicked shall cease from troubling. We are boss here, an' we keep the grip or lose our toe-nails, b' darn!"

"Hold hard!" added the late wielder of the staff. "Keep your prisoner down, and we will tear him limb from limb like the eagles of Sahara!"

"Puyallup Peter and Brown Bet!" Olive exclaimed. "I am saved!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SURPRISES FOR ALL.

Spokane Saul faced the mob calmly.

"Friends," he returned, "I did not catch the exact purport of your remarks, but your reference to lynching is not what I would hear you speak of. Pray, whom do you wish to serve so summarily?"

"You!" shouted a big miner. "Durn ye! you're the one! Prepare fer death, fer you've got ter dance a jig on nothin'!"

"This is a strange jest—"

"It ain't no jest, by mighty! You have robbed us, an' now you kin take the consequences. You

are a hypocrite an' a robber. On! you did a smart deed in gettin' our Sahara stocks fer nothin', didn't you? Wal you'll pay fer it, now. We are enlightened, at last. Hinch Trim has confessed, an' we know how you hev played it on us. You got our shares fer one-quarter, but you won't live to enjoy it. We are goin' ter string you up by the neck! Men, ain't that right?"

"Yes!" howled the mob in chorus. "Lynch him! lynch him!"

The Samaritan showed no signs of fear, but manifested a little mild surprise.

"Friends, do you mean this for me?" he inquired, serenely.

"Yes, and here's the proof!" shouted a big Swede, waving a rope above his head. "Come out and be strung up!"

"What have I done to deserve such severe language?"

"You've bin a hypocrite and a thief. You never was a Samaritan, but a fraud. You seduced us into selling our property to you for almost nothing, when you knew all the while it was worth ten times as much. Villain! robber! swindler! we will make you pay for it! On, men; on and lynch him!"

There was an answering bowl of rage and the party moved forward, but Spokane Saul remained calm and placid.

"Wait!" he ordered, steadily. "Let me show you something!"

He turned toward the rear, and five other men came out of the house and stood by him.

"Allow me," he added, "to introduce to you five detectives from Denver. Their leader is known by repute to you all."

He mentioned a name which was, indeed, familiar to every resident of the West.

"You will not lynch me," he proceeded, "for these brave fellows will defend me. You are helpless!"

There was utter silence among the members of the mob. Baffled? Yes; they were that, for not one of them cared to attack the sturdy officers of law. Baffled! Their arch enemy must escape!

"Do you want fighting?" Saul inquired, coolly.

"Man, if you are not all fiend, have mercy upon us! We have wives and children, and we are beggars when we should be rich, were it not for you. If you have one iota of human feeling, have mercy!"

The Samaritan took a folded paper from his pocket.

"Do you recognize this?" he demanded.

The miners groaned. It was the paper by which they had that morning signed away all they had to him.

"Here it is," Saul went on, serenely. "'Tis a document you all put your names to freely. No compulsion existed. It was a free trade. I bought; I have! By this act I hold the Sahara mines in my hand. A legal paper in all ways! Who says I am not entitled to it?"

Some of the miners wrung their hands in utter grief.

"It is mine, all mine!" pursued Saul, with placid satisfaction.

A deep groan rose.

"Does any one dispute my right?"

There was no answer. The miners were crushed.

"Yesterday," went on the Samaritan, showing not a trace of emotion, "the mines were yours. At this minute all is mine! See how I keep my power!"

With a quick movement Spokane Saul tore the paper to pieces.

"And now, the mines are once more YOURS!"

Dumfounded, the lynchers could only look in amazement. Saul suddenly drew his figure erect, revealing more spirit than they ever had seen him show before.

"Men of Sahara," he added, "I am not so much of a robber as I have seemed. By this act I cease to possess one dollar in your town's belongings. I never aspired to possess what I have rejected. On the contrary, when I got your signatures I had detectives here, ready to uphold, not my rights, but yours. I came to Sahara solely to save you and your property. I have done it. Saved, I return your own to you. Yet, if you still wish to sell, I will give you, not one dollar for each four you paid in, but twenty for each four! Is this robbing you, or is it saving you?"

Not yet did the people understand, but they had seen the paper torn up, and as they realized that Saul had renounced all for them, there arose a shout which made the air tremble.

They threw their hats high in air; they shook hands one with the other; they embraced; and finally some of the more demonstrative pressed forward and tried to kiss the feet of the man who was again the Samaritan of Sahara.

Outwardly, he had never been calmer.

"One thing more," he finally found chance to say. "Look here!"

Other officers appeared behind him, and with them, handcuffed and downcast, were Thomas Hammond, Daniel Wayland and Andrew Damon.

"Within this hour," Saul explained, "these three men have been arrested for swindling you through the long years, and I take some pleasure in saying it was I who brought them to justice!"

Another lull; then a shout of tremendous power:

"Hurrah for Spokane Saul!"

It was an hour before anything like calmness could be restored. There was much to say in the way of explanation, but it was not until quiet had been restored that the Samaritan was able to make a coherent statement of the facts.

When Hammond, Wayland and Damon had been duly locked up, more work was made by the arrival of Gurdon Forrest, Puyallup Peter and Brown Bet with Olive as an honored charge, and Julius Cohen and Mrs. Pearl as prisoners. It was related how the Banshee had learned that Olive had been abducted, and had come to the mob as it moved and taken Gurdon and Peter away to help her, and how they had been successful in saving the girl and capturing her foes.

This was told, but it was only a drop in the bucket. All were thinking too much of the glorious day which had dawned for Sahara, and the great goodness of Spokane Saul, to heed other things very much.

With Olive, Gurdon, Puyallup Peter, Bet, Patience and a few others for auditors, the truly-popular Samaritan told the facts:

"My name is not S ul Littlefinger," he began, "but I am a physician. I reside some fifty miles from here. Several months ago a friend of mine told me of a case in which, as a detective, he was much interested."

He believed that fraud was going on at the mining-camp of Sahara. He knew of gold being shipped in such a way, and in such quantities, that he suspected secret robbery, here. He, however, believed it would be hard to get proof, and would require a long campaign against the robber.

"As a result of my talk with him I agreed to turn detective, a calling which is not in any way mine."

"I came here and assumed the character you have seen me use."

"I am a man of blood, spirit, force; even of temper. I usually wear a mustache. With that ornament removed, I have the ministerial face you now see. Knowing this, I assumed a role in keeping. I became mild, bland, benign and ever calm. As such a man I played my part like a stage-actor."

"How I gained little by little I need not tell, now, but let me explain certain things. I soon satisfied myself that the leaders, here, were indeed, robbing the miners, but it was no easy matter to get full proof. At times I was menaced with utter ruin, as far as my plan was concerned, and only that I had gained certain other secrets I should have failed."

"First of all, I am one of the road-agents of the Punch-Bowl, and the only one who profited by that robbery. With one other associate I planned to do the work, after satisfying myself that gold was to be sent out of camp secretly on that night. We lay in wait at the Punch-Bowl, but nearly lost all because another was ahead of me."

"Gurdon Forrest and Puyallup Peter, working to the same good end, attacked the wagon before I and my aid could, but while they fought with Hinch and Moses, I, after giving brief aid, as they will remember, took the team, which had begun to wander away uneasily, and drove it down the hill."

"I was soon joined by my aid, and we secreted the treasure and got back to town. If any one had thought of it, many would have sworn I was all the while at the Mutual Ball, yet it is a fact that I had slipped away from that place, done my road-agent act, and returned without my absence on the pillage errand being discovered by any one."

"When I went to Sahara I at once recognized Mrs. Pearl Hammond as the divorced wife of a former crook and sharper. I knew her history well, and was sure of my grip. Learning, the morning after the Punch-Bowl affair, that she had suspicion of Gurdon Forrest, and was going to testify against him in court, I saw her and let her know she must not do it. I talked to her in my bland, Samaritan way, but she understood and kept silent."

"Gurdon was saved, then, but he nearly got into trouble, later, by attacking the company's store-house. Cornered in a pocket of the cliff he and Puyallup Peter would have been captured or killed had I not been near. It was I who lowered the rope by which they climbed up and escaped. It puzzled them much to guess who had saved them. I dared not tell, for though I knew they were my fellow-robbers, I was not sure enough of their motives to put confidence in them."

"It was I who wounded Hinch Trim at Damon's saloon. I was nearly cornered, then. If I had not knocked him senseless, promptly, all my work might have been for naught, for he caught me spying around the spot. By stunning him I escaped recognition."

"Later, Gurdon and Peter discovered our temporary hiding-place of the treasure. My ally faced them, there, and kept them at bay for a time. The two men who attacked us there were probably tramps."

"At Gurdon's last trial I again saved him. I

let Cohen know I was aware of his past life, and in my bland way told him to let up on Gurdon. Fear made him do this rather than be known as a former crook.

"Now, my ally, before mentioned, was none other than Brown Bet, the Banshee. She came to Sahara to help me, and did it well. She is what she seems—a wandering woman; but is of rare intelligence, really. When Cohen and Pearl, after their divorce, deserted their child, Patience, the latter was given to Bet to keep. Thus, she made an extra good ally for me, as they feared her.

"I introduced Patience to the Hammond house to put the collar of my authority about Mrs. Pearl's neck. The plan worked well.

"Now, as to my act in buying up the miners' stock in the district here. At times I despaired of getting the proof I desired of the swindle being perpetrated by Hammond and his gang. Thinking I might fail, I determined to buy all of the common men out—all I dared to approach—and, if need be, fight Hammond and his fellows in court. This was my plan.

"That I insisted on a price so small was because I had no more to invest.

"Meek Moses, thinking he was in danger of death—he was not—confessed the great mine plot to me. I promptly let Hammond know of it, so I could have a rod of terror over his head. From him I took shares in the mines, for that was what a rascal would do, and I wished him to think me one.

"Last of all," added Spokane Saul, looking at Olive and smiling, "there is one here who is probably wondering how I will explain away certain deeds known only to her. I early found that Miss Hammond was inclined to favor Gurdon stoutly, and feared her zeal would injure my own scheme, without doing any good.

"It was my plan to trust no one but the Banshee. I at once made love to Miss Olive, and acted the villain to perfection, I think. I did this because I wanted her to fear me to an extreme, so she would not try to work for Gurdon, nor make public speeches dangerous to me.

"Perhaps I did wrong in this, but I offer these excuses: First, I was a happy married man; second, I was sure she did not care for me; third, I made myself so disagreeable I was sure she would soon hate me. This she did, but now the fight is over, I beg she will forgive any act rising from excess of zeal or want of judgment."

It seemed a different Saul who was speaking, and though Olive blushed vividly, she replied:

"The old Saul I cannot forgive, but the new I am sure I can welcome as a true friend!"

"So say we all, b'durn!" cried Puyallup Peter.

"Sir Samaritan," added Gurdon, "this camp owes you too much to quibble over small affairs. We all hail you as our deliverer."

"And you most of all ought to, young man!" put in the Banshee. "Is it not he who has saved you from the eagles of Sahara? Ay, ay! and a bonny lass may be the dove of your life!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Gurdon. "What is that? Have the miners come again?"

And from outside the house rose the deafening shout:

"Hurrah for Spokane Saul!"

It was a lusty haul when Hammond, Wayland, Damon, Cohen, Mrs. Pearl, Trim and Moses went to prison in a batch, all with long terms to serve. So ended their rule of evil at the camp.

Work went on under a new management, and the mines paid richly. All is prosperity at Sahara. Gurdon was made president of the company, Benoni Lyon his aid, and faithful Puyallup Peter was superintendent. Worthy combination, and one that brought a period truly "golden" to all.

Olive remained at the town, and nobody was surprised when she and Gurdon united their interests, not only in the mine, but in all things worldly. Their married life is one of unalloyed happiness.

Brown Bet went her way. Now and then she returns for a day or two, but she claims to despise town life.

Patience was given a good home.

Spokane Saul, the once suspect, was the idol of Sahara more than ever, and he could have had all the miners had to bestow, but he would not accept one dollar of stock. Taking only their good will, he went back to his family. Now, he acts only as a doctor, and his detective talents sleep.

He comes often to Sahara as the guest of Gurdon and his wife, and they, and the miners, and all, delight to meet him who was, indeed, the Samaritan of the camp.

THE END.

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- 310 The Marshal of Safanstown; or, The League.
- 303 Top-Notch Tom, the Cowboy Outlaw.
- 295 Old Cross-Eye, the Maverick-Hunter.
- 290 The Lost Corvette; or, Blakeley's Last Cruise.
- 284 The Three Frigates; or, Old Ironsides' Revenge.
- 277 The Saucy Jane, Privateer.
- 272 Seth Slocum, Railroad Surveyor.
- 265 Old Double-Sword; or, Pilots and Pirates.
- 253 A Yankee Cossack; or, The Queen of the Nihilists.
- 247 Alligator Ike; or, The Secret of the Everglade.
- 242 The Fog Devil; or, The Skipper of the Flash.
- 230 The Flying Dutchman of 1880.
- 226 The Mad Hussars; or, The O's and the Mac's.
- 215 Parson Jim, King of the Cowboys.
- 211 Colonel Plunger; or, The Unknown Sport.
- 206 One Eye, the Cannoneer.
- 193 The Man in Red; or, The Ghost of the Old Guard.
- 187 The Death's Head Cuirassiers.
- 174 The Phantom Knights.
- 159 Red Rudiger, the Archer.
- 132 Nemo, King of the Tramps.
- 115 The Severed Head; or, The Castle Coucy Secret.
- 108 The Duke of Diamonds.
- 98 The Rock Rider; or, The Spirit of the Sierra.
- 96 Double Death; or, The Spy of Wyoming.
- 69 The Irish Captain, A Tale of Fontenoy.
- 65 The Red Rajah; or, The Scourge of the Indies.
- 39 The Russian Spy; or, The Starry Cross Brothers.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

- 483 Flush Fred, the River Sharp.
- 368 The Canyon King; or, a Price on his Head.
- 348 Dan Dillon, King of Crosscut.
- 337 Old Gabe, the Mountain Tramp.
- 327 Terrapin Dick, the Wildwood Detective.
- 315 Flush Fred's Double; or, The Squatters' League.
- 308 Hemlock Hank, Tough and True.
- 298 Logger Lem; or, Life in the Pine Woods.
- 289 Flush Fred's Full Hand.
- 274 Flush Fred, the Mississippi Sport.
- 248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp.
- 232 Bill the Blizzard; or, Red Jack's Crime.
- 209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.
- 129 Mississippi Mose; or, a Strong Man's Sacrifice.

MISCELLANEOUS.

- 566 The Dauntless Detective; or, The Daughter Avenger. By Tom W. King.
- 542 The Ocean Drift; or, The Fight for Two Lives. By A. F. Holt.
- 534 Gre-n Mountain Joe; or, The Counterfeiter's Cave. By Marmaduke Dey.
- 518 Royal Richard, the Thoroughbred. By J. W. Osbon.
- 410 Sarah Brown, Detective. By K. F. Hill.
- 366 The Telegraph Detective. By George H. Morse.
- 353 Bart Brennan; or, The King of Straight Flush. By John Cuthbert.
- 350 Flash Falcon, Society Detective. By W. J. Cobb.
- 312 Kinkfoot Karl, the Mountain Scourge. By Morris Redwing.
- 275 The Smuggler Cutter. By J. D. Conroy.
- 261 Black Sam, the Prairie Thunderbolt. By Col. Jo Yards.
- 190 The Three Guardsmen. By Alexander Dumas.
- 179 Conrad, the Convict. By Prof. Gildersleeve.
- 163 Owllet, the Robber Prince. By S. R. Urban.
- 153 The Doomed Dozen. By Dr. Frank Powell.
- 152 Captain Ironnerve, the Counterfeiter Chief.
- 146 The Doctor Detective. By George Lemuel.
- 144 The Hunchback of Notre Dame. By Victor Hugo.
- 140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.
- 133 Rody the Rover. By William Carleton.
- 125 The Blacksmith Outlaw. By H. Ainsworth.
- 110 The Silent Rifleman. By H. W. Herbert.
- 102 The Masked Band. By George L. Aiken.
- 78 The Mysterious Spy. By Arthur M. Grainger.
- 76 The Queen's Musketeers. By George Albany.
- 68 The Fighting Trapper. By Capt. J. F. C. Adams.
- 60 Wide Awake, the Robber King. By F. Dumont.
- 32 B'hoys of Yale; or, The Scrapes of Collegians.
- 11 Midshipman Easy. By Captain Marryatt.
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- 661 The Get-There Sharp.
- 651 Silvertip Steve, the Sky Scraper from Siskiyou.
- 645 Gopher Gabe, the Unseen Detective.
- 636 Dandy Darling, Detective.
- 627 Mossback Mose, the Mountaineer.
- 617 The Grip Sack Sharp's Even up.
- 597 Big Bandy, the Brigadier of Brimstone Butte.
- 588 Sandy Sands, the Sharp from Snap City.
- 576 Silver-Tongued Sid; or, Grip Sack Sharp's Sweep.
- 564 The Grip-Sack Sharp; or, The Seraphs of Sodom.
- 555 Grip-Sack Sid, the Sample Sport.
- 547 The Buried Detective; or, Saul's Six Sensations.
- 541 Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve.
- 535 Dandy Dutch, the Decorator from Dead-Lift.
- 527 Dandy Andy, the Diamond Detective.
- 514 Gabe Gunn, the Grizzly from Ginseng.
- 504 Solemn Saul, the Sad Man from San Saba.
- 495 Rattlepate Rob; or, The Roundhead's Reprisal.
- 488 The Thoroughbred Sport.
- 474 Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop.
- 466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.
- 458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.
- 450 The Rustler Detective.
- 443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.
- 438 Oklahoma Nick.
- 433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
- 426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Secret Service Spy.
- 416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.
- 409 Rob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.
- 403 The Nameless Sport.
- 395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.
- 387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
- 379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
- 372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
- 367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
- 360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.
- 355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
- 351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
- 345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
- 339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
- 331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
- 324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.
- 317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.
- 303 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.
- 292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.
- 286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
- 283 Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
- 257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Man 'Way Back.
- 249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.
- 241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.
- 233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.
- 201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.
- 197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.
- 180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.
- 170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.
- 165 Joaquin, the Terrible.
- 154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
- 141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
- 127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
- 119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
- 105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
- 88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
- 71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
- 67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
- 64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
- 50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
- 47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
- 45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
- 40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.
- 30 Gospel George; or, Fiery Fred, the Outlaw.
- 28 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.

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- 692 Dead-Shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer.
- 655 Strawberry Sam, the Man with the Birthmark.
- 646 Dark John, the Grim Guard.
- 638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.
- 623 Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective.
- 611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.
- 590 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.
- 585 Dan Dixon's Double.
- 575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
- 563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honey-suckle.
- 551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.
- 539 Old Doubledark, the Willy Detective.
- 531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
- 521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
- 513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
- 506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.
- 498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
- 492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
- 486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
- 479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
- 470 The Duke of Dakota.
- 463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
- 455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
- 449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
- 442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
- 437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
- 427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
- 415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
- 405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
- 385 Will Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
- 297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
- 279 The Gold Dragoon, or, California Bloodhound.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.
- 612 Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry.
- 598 The Dominie Detective.
- 591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.
- 580 Shadowing a Shadow.
- 565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
- 557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.
- 519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
- 499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
- 472 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.
- 452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulp from Texas.
- 436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pice.
- 422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
- 390 The Giant Cupid; or, Cibuta John's Jubilee.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

- 685 The Red-skin Sea Rover.
- 679 Revello, the Pirate Cruiser; or, The Rival Rovers.
- 672 The Red Raper; or, The Sea Rover's Bride.
- 662 The Jew Detective; or, The Beautiful Convict.
- 658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.
- 653 The Lasso King's League. A companion Story to "Buck Taylor, the Saddle King."
- 649 Buck Taylor, the Saddle King.
- 640 The Rover's Retribution.
- 635 The Ex Buccaneer; or, The Stigma of Sin.
- 630 The Sea Thief.
- 625 Red Wings; or, The Gold Seekers of the Bahamas.
- 615 The Three Buccaneers.
- 610 The Red Flag Rover; or, White Wings of the Deep.
- 605 The Shadow Silver Ship.
- 600 The Silver Ship; or, The Sea Scouts of '76.
- 593 The Sea Rebel; or, Red Rovers of the Revolution.
- 587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy; or, True Hearts of '76.
- 581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.
- 560 The Man from Mexico.
- 553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
- 546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.
- 540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.
- 530 The Savages of the Sea.
- 524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
- 516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
- 510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
- 493 The Scouts of the Sea.
- 489 The Pirate Hunter; or, The Ocean Rivals.
- 482 Ocean Tramps; or, The Desperadoes of the Deep.
- 476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer; or, the Red Sea Raider.
- 469 The Lieutenant Detective; or, the Fugitive Sailor.
- 457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.
- 446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
- 435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
- 430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
- 425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
- 418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
- 399 The New Monte Cristo.
- 398 The Convict Captain.
- 388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
- 377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
- 373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
- 369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
- 364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
- 346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
- 341 The Sea Desperado.
- 336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
- 325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
- 318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
- 307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
- 281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
- 259 Outlaw and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
- 255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
- 246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
- 235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
- 231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
- 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
- 220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
- 216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
- 210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
- 205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
- 198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
- 184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
- 181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
- 177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
- 172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
- 162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
- 155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
- 147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
- 139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
- 134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
- 131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trapper.
- 128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
- 121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
- 116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
- 109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
- 104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
- 103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
- 94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
- 89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
- 85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
- 2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.

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- 691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail.
- 682 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.
- 667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
- 644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza.
- *639 The Gold King; or, Montebello, the Magnificent.
- 629 Daredevil Dick; or, Buffalo Bill's Daring Role.
- *599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pards of the Plains.
- 517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
- *414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
- *401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
- *397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
- *394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
- 362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or Oath Bound to Custer.
- 329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
- *319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
- *304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
- *243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
- 189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
- 175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
- 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
- 158 The Doomed Dozen; or, Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
- 117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard.
- 92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.
- *83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
- *53 Death-Trailer, the Chief of Scouts.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

- 688 The River Rustlers.
- 673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
- 668 The River Rustlers; or, The Detective from Way Back.
- 673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
- 666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.
- 618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
- 552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
- 528 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 681 Joe Phenix's Specials.
- 674 Uncle Sun Up, the Born Detective.
- 670 The Lightweight Detective.
- 665 The Frisco Detective; or, The Golden Gate Find.
- 660 The Fresh in Montana.
- 652 Jac son Blake, the Bouncer Detective.
- 647 The Fresh of Frisco at Santa Fe.
- 637 Joe Phenix in Crazy Camp.
- 632 Joe Phenix's Master Search.
- 628 Joe Phenix's Combin.
- 620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.
- 617 Keen Billy, the Sport.
- 607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.
- 601 Joe Phenix's Shadow.
- 594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.
- 583 The Silver Sharp Detective.
- 577 Tom of California.
- 570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.
- 562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
- 556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevaier.
- 537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.
- 529 The Fresh in New York.
- 520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
- 497 The Fresh in Texas.
- 490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
- 475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
- 465 The Actor Detective.
- 461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
- 440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
- 423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
- 419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
- 408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
- 391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
- 384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
- 381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
- 376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
- 370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
- 363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
- 354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
- 349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
- 320 The Genteel Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
- 252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
- 203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
- 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
- 173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
- 161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
- 130 Captain Voicano; or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
- 112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
- 107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
- 101 The Man from New York.
- 97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
- 93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
- 91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
- 84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
- 81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
- 79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
- 77 The Fresh of Frisco; or, The Heiress.
- 75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor, Prison and Street.
- 72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.
- 63 The Winged Whale; or, The Red Rupert of Gulf.
- 59 The Man from Texas; or, The Arkansas Outlaw.
- 56 The Indian Mazeppa; or, Madman of the Plains.
- 49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
- 42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
- 41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.
- 38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
- 36 Injun Dick; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
- 35 Kentuck, the Sport; or, Dick Talbot of the Mines.
- 34 Rocky Mountain Rob, the California Outlaw.
- 33 Overland Kit; or, The Idol of White Pine.
- 31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
- 27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.

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